WORDS WITHOUT END:
THE DEVELOPMENT OF T. S. ELIOT’S POETICS
FROM THE WASTE LAND TO FOUR QUARTETS

BY

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

English

May 2011

Winston-Salem, North Carolina

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“As we get older we do not get any younger.
   Seasons return, and today I am fifty-five,
   And this time last year I was fifty-four,
   And this time next year I shall be sixty-two.”
   - Henry Reed, “Chard Whitlow”

I want to thank Dr. Kuberski for his patient questions and explanations throughout the thesis-writing process, and for helping me along in my clumsy attempts to “get [academically] older.”

I also want to thank the other Two Graces, who helped maintain a remarkable sense of peace in our household despite the fact that each one of us was “alligator wrestling, at the level of the sentence” (Annie Dillard).

I owe a special thanks to Anna Gissing for her constant encouragement and support, which took the form on one occasion of an emergency visit, and the gift of a book to remind me of my love of literature.

I am indebted to my grandparents who through cell phone chats supported me by believing in my work when I did not.

I am also grateful to my sister, Mary, for expressing unconditional belief in my thesis. Her belief was always greatly encouraging, especially when it flew in the face of the evidence.

Most of all, I want to thank my parents:

Mum: for continually reminding me, in the course of our conversations and her own creative work, of the greater beauty of the “poetical life,” and its presence in each “point of intersection of the timeless/ With Time.”

Dad: for his apparently infinite patience and generosity in sharing time and wisdom, and for providing such an attractive model of the “intellectual virtues.” And, as any good wizard would do, for reminding me that my only task was to decide “what to do with the time that was given me.”
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ABSTRACT

In Real Presences George Steiner provocatively claims: “It is this break of the covenant between word and world which constitutes one of the very few genuine revolutions of spirit in Western history and which defines modernity itself” (Presences 93). As the “high modernist” poet par excellence, I propose to read both of T. S. Eliot’s long poems as distinct responses to the similar recognition of a “break of the covenant between word and world.” The Waste Land stares into the void of non-reference in despair. The poem polarizes a problematic multitude of voices (i.e. Babel) and the hoped-for single, divine voice of the Thunder. By contrast, Four Quartets not only admits but actively perpetrates linguistic slippage and non-reference. It thereby progresses by way of a poetics of renunciation that resists competing modes of knowledge, including rationality, experience, and the autonomous text. Instead of hoping in the recovery of a divine voice or sound, the poem places its hope in the possibility of dialogue through which the presence of a divine person is intuited.
Introduction

Statement of Purpose

In Real Presences George Steiner provocatively claims: “It is this break of the covenant between word and world which constitutes one of the very few genuine revolutions of spirit in Western history and which defines modernity itself” (Presences 93). Modernist scholars frequently study the repercussions of the “language revolution” on modernist poets (Extraterritorial viii). Written in 1922, the peak of “high modernism,” T. S. Eliot’s TWL has been considered a paradigmatic modernist crisis poem that thematically and formally embodies its struggle over the “break of the covenant.” Scholars commonly interpret FQ, by contrast, as the older Eliot’s retreat from crisis into the blindness of dogmatic belief: “Eliot is suspected of having given in to the temptation: falling back on old mythologies to avoid the terror of the abyss” (Modernism 330). In approaching FQ Michael Edwards begins by observing: “The language of a Christian poem should also be Christian. (As the language of a tragedy should, arguably, be tragic.) The subject is very complex, and has hardly begun to be examined; its implications seem to me awesome” (Edwards 114). To apply Edwards’ contention to T. S. Eliot’s poetic development, a development either stultified or progressed by his conversion, is to ask, is T. S. Eliot’s post-conversion poetry “born again”? Regardless of its cause, critics generally perceive a distinct shift, if not break, in Eliot’s poetic technique and subject matter from TWL to FQ.

It is my contention that Eliot’s poetic vocation as a whole develops in tandem with his response to the “language revolution.” I propose to reverse the axis on which
critics tend to place *TWL* and *FQ*. On my reading, *TWL*’s insight into the void—embodied formally in its fragmented voices—constitutes its central crisis. I argue that *TWL* represents its themes of sexual and relational sterility through the speech patterns of its personae. In the few instances in which personae dialogue, the dialogue is severely troubled and does not end in communion. *TWL*’s curse is that personae cannot make love, and the failure is exacerbated, and represented, by their inability to communicate. (After all, to communicate, to “make common,” is etymologically related to communion, to “make one.”) In addition to expressing this central problematic through a series of disconnected monologues, *TWL* finally gestures towards its salvation: a divine and immediately accessible voice who might enable dialogue.

*FQ* acknowledges the “void” of non-reference following the “language revolution,” but progresses past *TWL*’s efforts to re-establish a divine voice. Instead, it renounces overly confident attempts to master language (and therefore communicate), and successively resists the voices of logic, experience, and the autonomous text. Whereas the Questing Knight searches the Waste Land for a divine voice, the penitent man of letters undergoes purgation through the course of the *Quartets* to arrive at a place of prayer. Salvation for *FQ* depends not on an immediate and transcendent voice, but on the renewed possibility of dialogue.

Martin Warner articulates the relation between both poems that I hope to expand by close-reading their formal techniques: “*The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, taken together, seek at once to acknowledge the human significance of ‘heart of light’ experiences (and their analogues) which appear to point to the *Logos*, and the reality...of the constant deferral of their promise” (Warner 127). Warner argues that both poems
stem from Eliot’s life-long sense simultaneously of divine absence and of the possibility of divine presence. I hope to advance Warner’s observation by close-reading each poem’s distinct poetic techniques. My primary question, therefore, is how the poems’ themes and poetic forms and techniques embody different orientations towards the same “abyss.”

**Constructing a critical/theoretical framework**

1. George Steiner and Paul de Man

   George Steiner’s claim about the “break in the covenant between word and world” seeks to account for modernity’s theological developments (especially the “death of God”) and epistemological trends (such as the rise of the subject and interest in subjective consciousness). Steiner explores the comprehensive reach of the “crisis of the word” (*Presences* 93):

   Western theology and the metaphysics, epistemology and aesthetics, which have been its major footnotes, are ‘logocentric.’ This is to say that they axiomatize as fundamental and pre-eminent the concept of a ‘presence.’ It can be that of God...It can be that of Cartesian self-consciousness; of Kant’s transcendent logic or of Heidegger’s ‘Being.’ It is to these pivots that the spokes of meaning finally lead. They insure plenitude. That presence, theological, ontological or metaphysical, makes credible the assertion that there ‘is something in what we say.’” (121)

   Steiner contributes to critical discourse a multi-disciplinary and historically sensitive framework. It is within this framework that I read the presence/absence tension in Eliot’s poetry. A few central spokes lead out of, and back to, the dynamic that is so central to modernism. Since presence and absence, and the corollary terms plenitude and vacancy, are central to my argument, I will define the terms as I use them.
a. Presence

According to Steiner, pre-modern thinkers assumed that the correlation between word and world implied the presence of God: “A Logos – order entails, as I want to show, a central supposition of ‘real presence’” (96). Words and world signify each other with relative stability because an external origin - God - presupposes and transcends both. “Logos - order” assumes that a certain objective order coheres in the world, and that language partakes of that order. Although countless variations qualify this basic concept of “presence,” Steiner’s description encompasses Western metaphysic’s telltale signature: “logocentrism.” The accompanying epistemology assumes, at the very least, that language and logic can denote some aspects of the world with relative accuracy.

b. Plenitude

Plenitude and presence are intimately connected, but not indistinguishable. I draw primarily on Paul De Man’s formulations of plenitude in the course of my study, since he reads into presence the distinctly modern[ist] concern with (and suspicion of) plenitude. Whereas presence refers to a basic connection between word and world, plenitude implies words’ immediacy and transparency, the “ready availability, without deferral, of ‘the logos...common to all’” (Warner 127). De Man considers Rousseau’s prioritization of “the unmediated presence of the self to its own voice” as a paradigmatic trope for plenitude (Blindness 114).¹ The self coincides with the self just as words coincide with the world. I distinguish between presence and plenitude since some traditions affirm

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¹ De Man delineates “Rousseau’s assertion of the primacy of voice over the written word...his valorization of unmediated presence over reflection” (Blindness 114). In short, Rousseau believes in “plenitude, unity of being” (113).
presence (the reality of God and the pre-existing *logos*) but not plenitude (“ready availability, without deferral”).

c. Absence

For Steiner, Stèphane Mallarmé initiated the trend of repudiating the covenant of reference. Mallarmé’s insistence that non-reference constitutes true genius and entails a central supposition of “real absence: The consequence is in a rigorous philosophic-semantic sense...an ontologic nihilism” (Presence 96).

d. Vacancy

Vacancy refers to the linguistic results of the basic “epistemology, the linguistics of ‘real absence’” (99). As I employ the term in my argument, vacancy signifies the utter non-reference of the sign, and ensuing non-coincidence of self with self. De Man understands vacancy as fundamental non-coincidence: “In the act of anthropological intersubjective interpretation, a fundamental discrepancy always prevents the observer from coinciding fully with the consciousness he is observing. The same discrepancy exists in everyday language, in the impossibility of making the actual expression coincide with what has to be expressed, of making the actual sign coincide with what it signifies” (Blindness 11). Steiner summarizes by pointing to “Mallarmé’s repudiation of the covenant of reference” and Rimbaud’s discovery that “[t]he ego is no longer itself” (Presences 96, 99). The ontology of absence demystifies the myth of “logocentrism” and therefore demonstrates the artificiality of rationality, signs and the autonomous text. If word and world have fallen apart, then every attempt to understand or perceive the world that depends upon language will be to varying degrees artificial. So goes De Man’s central argument in Allegories of Reading:
Judgment, also called ‘attention,’ ‘mediation,’ ‘reflection,’ or ‘thought’ [pensées]...neither reveals things for what they are nor leaves them undisturbed. It moves them around, thus mimicking the etymology of the very term metaphor...Judgment does this in order to create systems of relationship that are not substantial but merely structural; from a formal point of view, these systems are by no means arbitrary but since they are devoid of ontological authority, they are not controlled by considerations of truth and falsehood...[T]he act of thought is itself, but its very manifestation, a falsification...[I]t uses structural resemblances in order to conceal the differences that permit the very articulations of structure. (Allegories 232).

De Man’s post-structuralist argument suggests that the world is essentially constructed by, and of, words.

e. Two kinds of nothing

Finally, as I examine the presence/plenitude and absence/vacancy tension throughout Eliot’s two long poems, I point frequently to the concept and sense of “nothing” as it pertains to each. My thesis develops out of the observation that both presence and absence can be expressed, and formally represented, by a sense of “nothing.” For medieval apohatic writers, silence, the literary representation of “nothing,” signifies the completion and fulfillment of words. By contrast, for some modernists and later post-structuralists silence signifies the “presence of nothingness” (Blindness 18). In the words of Gertrude Stein, “There is no there there” (Stein 289). For De Man the vacant sign constantly points back to nothing, where nothing is non-reference and non-meaning:
The sign is devoid of substance, not because it has to be a transparent indicator that should not mask a plenitude of meaning, but because the meaning itself is empty; the sign should not offer its own sensory richness as a substitute for the void that it signifies. Contrary to Derrida’s assertion, Rousseau’s theory of representation is not directed toward meaning as presence and plenitude but toward meaning as void. (Blindness 127)

Literature demystifies the myth of plenitude most powerfully since its very premise is artifice and fiction: it “does not fulfill a plenitude but originates in the void that separates intent from reality. The imagination takes its flight only after the void, the in-authenticity of the existential project has been revealed” (34).

Many modernist texts represent De Man’s “nothingness” through disintegration of the coherent self and, by extension, of the autonomous text (Modernism 80). In addition, several texts formally evince a loss of narrative coherence or unity. Richard Sheppard observes: “modern poetry is permeated by a sense of homelessness...[a] principle of unity is felt to have been lost, the present seems to lose its organic connection with the past and the future” (327). Modernist writers are frequently motivated by their desire to deal with the results of the broken covenant: “Thus the task of the modern poet becomes the creation of a redeemed, visionary world of language in which, as Andre Breton put it...‘something fundamental’ is given back to form and in which the lost dimension of language and the human psyche is rediscovered or preserved” (329). Modernist texts

\[C.f. \text{ “Literature, unlike everyday language, begins on the far side of this knowledge [of demystification]; it is the only form of language free from the fallacy of unmediated expression...The self-reflecting mirror-effect by means of which a work of fiction asserts, by its very existence, its separation from empirical reality, its divergence, as a sign, from a meaning that depends for its existence on the constitutive activity of this sign, characterizes the work of literature in its essence” (17).}\]
respond to the “presence of nothingness” by formally representing the non-coincidence of the self to the self, linguistic slippage and loss of a unifying principle.

However, an ontology of presence can also lead to the affirmation of a kind of nothingness, or when expressed literarily, of silence. The medieval apophatic tradition exemplifies this quality of “nothing” perhaps most cogently, although versions of it continue in Western civilization through John Keats’ “negative capabilities” to György Lukács’ “negative mysticism.” St. John of the Cross, the medieval mystic, displays this approach The Dark Night of the Soul. For St. John, since God is ineffable saints can only approach him through the “way of negation.” His opening poem introduces the “negative way,” or via negativa: “If you want to possess everything,/ You must desire to possess nothing;” “If you want to know all, / You must desire to know nothing” (St. John 26). St. John renounces plenitude in order to approach an ineffable presence.

My argument situates Eliot’s poetic vocation within both traditions of “nothing.” Eliot’s poems simultaneously acknowledge the “void” of non-reference and intuit in the absence the possibility of presence. My particular question addresses how we might read TWL and FQ in relation to one another given that they both formally enact the presence/absence dialect in distinct manners. I employ George Steiner’s critical framework since it is historically sensitive and integrates linguistic, theological and epistemological spheres. I draw on Paul de Man to provide a vocabulary for the plenitude/vacancy dialect felt keenly by modernists. I incorporate St. John of the Cross’s work to illustrate the medieval apophatic approach to silence.

2. Colin Gunton: revisiting Heraclitus and Permenides
I also draw on Colin Gunton’s work as articulated in The One and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity. Gunton re-situates the age-old debate of the “one and the many” within modernity. Gunton extends Steiner’s insight concerning language into the philosophical and political domain. He begins with the premise already articulated by Steiner: “Modernity is the era which has displaced God as the focus for the unity and meaning of being” (Gunton 28). The result can be cast in terms of the one/many dynamic: “[M]odernity can be seen in some of its aspects, especially the political, as the assertion of elements of Heraclitus against the Parmenidean past” (25). If Steiner reads modernity as a break in the covenant between word and world, Gunton reads it “as the revolt of the many against the one, and at the same time that of humanity against divinity” (27).

Many scholars could agree with these insights. Gunton contributes an original argument when he claims that in its very attempt to revolt against the one modernity constructs either unintentionally or quite deliberately, a new source of unity: “In both the failed experiments of modern totalitarian regimes and the insidious homogeneity of consumer culture there is a tendency to submerge the many in the one. Where the true one is displaced, false and alienating god rush in to fill the vacancy” (35). Gunton recognizes irony at the heart of modernity’s tension between the one and the many: “The heart of the paradox of the modern condition is that a quest for the freedom of the many has eventuated in new forms of slavery to the one” (34). While Steiner articulates the historical reasons for, and repercussions of, the “break in the covenant,” Gunton offers a vocabulary for considering the philosophical, political and social ramifications of this on European culture.
I employ Gunton’s framework of ‘the one and the many’ in order to read the formal representation of the presence/absence tension in Eliot’s two poems. I argue that *TWL*’s fragments formally represent the “revolt of the many against the one,” but that it finally (and ironically) seeks to “to fill the vacancy” by asserting a divine voice (“DA”). *TWL* can be read as exemplifying the paradox of modernity: “the assertion of the rights of the many has paradoxically, dialectically perhaps, achieved the opposite, the subversion of the many by new and in some cases demonic versions of the one” (33). Many critics read *FQ*’s homogenous poetic form as its attempt to re-establish and impose “one” (cultural standard) on its “many” personae (if not readers). However, I propose that the poem abandons the quest for a stable source of unity, and instead attempts dynamic unity in the form of dialogue. On this reading, Eliot’s conversion to High Anglicanism enables him to maintain both the many and the one. Gunton points to the doctrine of *perichoresis* (the internal relationships of the Trinity, the three divine persons who share one essence) as the model in Christian theology whereby the one and the many are held in harmony: *perichoresis* “is one way of expressing the unity and plurality of the being of the God whose interaction with the world is unified and yet diverse” (63).

3. Mikhail Bakhtin

Finally, Mikhail Bakhtin provides a framework for reading the linguistic and philosophical themes in Eliot’s poems in light of their formal devices. Bakhtin (1885-1975) developed his unique insights in the context of political upheavals resulting in part from modernity’s struggle between the one and the many. Whereas Eliot responded to the “revolt of the many,” Bakhtin wrote under a political regime that over-emphasized the

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3 He concludes: “Communion is being in relation, in which there is due recognition of both particularity and relationality” (223).
“one.” Bakhtin contributes to the conversation of the “one and the many” by examining the literary and formal representations of each, particularly with an eye for discourse, speech patterns and voices. At the heart of The Dialogical Imagination lies the claim: “The principal idea of this essay is that the study of verbal art can and must overcome the divorce between an abstract ‘formal’ approach and an equally abstract ‘ideological’ approach. Form and content in discourse are one, once we understand that verbal discourse is a social phenomenon” (Dialogical 272). Bakhtin provides a vocabulary, then, for understanding how the ideology of the “one” and the “many” are formally represented through literary discourse (resulting in the monological and the dialogical novel, broadly). Bakhtin points to Leo Tolstoy’s literary style as an example of formal monologism: “In Tolstoy’s novel characters are internally self-enclosed and do not know one another” (Dostoevsky 69). The epistemological corollary to monologue is being “internally self-enclosed” – in short, solipsistic.

By contrast, Bakhtin points to Dostoevsky as the shining example of an author whose work is polyphonic and dialogical: “A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky’s novels” (6). Dostoevsky’s novels incorporate many voices (i.e. polyphony) but also establish grounds for dialogue: “The polyphonic novel is dialogic through and through...Thus all relationships among external and internal parts and elements of his novel are dialogic in character, and he structured the novel as a whole as a ‘great dialogue’” (40). The novel is polyphonic as a whole if it does not subsume its speakers into an authorial (i.e. monological) voice. For Bakhtin dialogism is an epistemological and ethical category. He defines dialogism: “Dialogism is the
characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia. Everything means, is understood, as part of a greater whole – there is constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others....The dialogical imperative, mandated by the pre-existence of the language world relative to any of its current inhabitants, issues that there can be no actual monologue” (Dialogical 426). Bakhtin envisions an ideological and formal alternative to monological speech, or to the problem of “the one.”

Bakhtin’s concepts of monologue, polyphony and dialogism provide a framework in which to discuss the elements of speech patterns and speakers’ voices in Eliot’s poems. He therefore enables us to examine the formal equivalent of the poems’ thematic elements (understood with the aid of Steiner and Gunton). I argue that TWL’s “voice-collage” (Politics 51) lies somewhere between Bakhtin’s description of Dostoevsky’s “polyphonic” and Tolstoy’s “internally self-enclosed” text. The poem recognizes the reality of many voices (i.e. polyphony), but does not envision them as defining and realizing each other. Thus TWL upholds both “the many” and “the one” as discrete, if not polarized, realities. FQ progresses past the impasse by evincing many voices but also admitting their dependence on a pre-existing word that enables dialogue. FQ places its hope in dialogical mediation between speakers.

**Critical Context**

I engage primarily those critics who discuss the presence/absence and one/many dialectic as it develops through Eliot’s poetic career. Critics almost unanimously agree that TWL’s fragmentation, collage technique and diverse voices (and dialects, idioms and languages) characterize it as a poem responding to the collapse of Western civilization.
However, critics differ when interpreting the poem’s orientation towards this voice-collage. For the sake of clarity I propose to place a few typical responses on a spectrum. On the far left I place those who read *TWL*’s fragments as Eliot’s success in achieving polyphony (“the revolt of the many against the one”); on the far right are those who maintain that the poem despairs over the resulting isolation and solipsism.

On the far left, then, Franco Moretti states that *TWL*’s fragmented form “frees” it from cultural oppression. In short: “Fragments. It is Eliot’s version of polyphony” (Moretti 186). Harriet Davidson might be situated on this end of the spectrum too. For her, *TWL*’s “persistent lack of a clear signification” combined with its “fragmentation releases meaning into the play of a human world rich with possibilities” (Davidson 4).

The poem does not regret the loss of an external source of “meaning,” but revels in its meaning-making ability: “The loss of the self combined with the loss of God mourned by earlier poets results in a world which is non-romantic, non-existential, and non-psychological. Instead, we now have what, since Heidegger, has been called the linguistic universe...the hermeneutic universe” (7). While Davidson’s argument is particularly insightful, I argue that neither she nor Moretti take into sufficient account the poem’s misery over the “void” of non-reference.

More recently Charles Pollard has argued that *TWL*’s multiple idioms, dialects and voices revivify the language of poetry (the “one”) with the voice of the folk (the

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4 He continues: “in the twentieth century polyphony frees itself because this anthropocentric framework – which simultaneously sustained and limited it – eventually disintegrates. And anthropocentrism disintegrates because the notion of a unitary individual – upon which it was premised – in turn collapses” (192). Eliot was haunted by the disintegration of the individual and “disassociation of sensibility.” It is therefore severely debatable whether he would have felt this as a “freeing” or enslaving historical development.

5 The implication, for Davidson, is that “this poem is wasteful in exactly this sense of excess, of plenitude beyond consumption. The Waste Land suggests too much, so that any attempt to define a meaning for the poem must necessarily waste multiple other meanings” (Davidson 1).
“many”): “Critics have praised Eliot’s ventriloquism as an important part of modernism’s
cultural breakthrough” (Pollard 101). Eliot’s “ventriloquism” (elsewhere termed
“mimicry” by Pollard) contributes to several modern poets’ “experiments to update
poetry with modern colloquial speech.” Michael North, another critic interested in the
national and transnational repercussions of Eliot’s verse, reads TWL in light of the
Standard English debates that circulated in England and North America in the early
twentieth century. In The Dialect of Modernism North argues that the rise of linguistic
diversity in modernism resulted from increasing industrialization and globalization in
addition to the “language revolution.” Pollard and North read TWL’s multiple forms as a
renewal of poetry itself. Yet unlike Moretti and Davidson, who gloss TWL’s fragments in
a positive light, North and Pollard recognize Eliot’s ambivalence towards his own poetic
technique. Pollard qualifies his argument: “While Eliot certainly deserves praise for these
experiments to update poetry with modern colloquial speech, it is a praise that tends to
obscure his own tentativeness about them” (Pollard 101). Practically, both critics argue
that TWL’s linguistic diversity works “against the standard” and towards “polyphony,”
but they also both recognize the poem’s ambivalence towards such linguistic diversity.
These critics move towards the right when qualifying TWL’s openness with Eliot’s
ambivalence.

Graham Hough can be located towards the right of the spectrum. He argues that
TWL descriptively recognizes fragmentation but prescriptively longs for unity:

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6 George Sampson articulates the rational behind Standard English proponents: “‘The one
common basis of a common culture is the common tongue’” (Dialect 14).
7 He continues: “More often than not, he nullifies or undermines the more revolutionary aspects
of these experiments: he cuts the allusions to minstrel songs in The Waste Land, rejects Vivien’s
suggestion to particularize the Cockney dialect through phonetic spelling; and abandons Sweeney
Agonistes in the middle of choosing it.”
Eliot’s *Waste Land*...consists of a variety of lyric fragments, some of a nostalgic traditional kind, some Surrealist dream-songs, interspersed with passages of dramatic realism and satire. In poetry of this kind the larger unities are not visible on the surface or present in any readily analyzable structure. They are given by a slow underground process of psychic development, often only discernable in retrospect. (*Modernism* 320).  

While he does not admit *TWL*’s search for an objective center on which to ground itself, Hough recognizes that *TWL* moves towards constructing a new whole. While I am sympathetic to this critical perspective, as it recognizes a typical modernist project of recovering unity, I suggest that *TWL* reaches for a salvific source of unity even beyond the bounds of the human subconscious or the reader. The far left does not account for Eliot’s personal terror over the abyss of non-reference and the possibility of solipsism. The far right lacks a sufficient explanation for *TWL*’s salvific “DA.” I argue that in order to account for *TWL*’s crisis and hope we can read the poem as reacting against linguistic vacancy by searching for linguistic plenitude.  

The spectrum on which critics place *FQ* is perhaps narrower. On the right are those who read *FQ*’s homogenous form as the older Eliot’s conservative attempts to impose a unifying or totalizing order on all experience. Graham Hough articulates this position: “Eliot is suspected of having given in to the temptation: falling back on old

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8 McFarlane explains that contemporary psychologists were recognizing that apparently fragmented dreams contained their own “logic.” In a similar manner many modernist writers were considering how to locate a new source of unity in the human subconscious (*Modernism* 85).

9 M. Rosenthal notes that many of Eliot’s poems were published as fragments before they took their final form as a whole poem (Rosenthal 157). This method of writing was typical among modernists and suggests that rather than abandoning order altogether they sought for new ways in which to envision and create it.
mythologies to avoid the terror of the abyss” (Modernism 330).\(^\text{10}\) The language recalls De Man’s own critique of those who affirm presence: “The human mind will go through amazing feats of distortion to avoid facing ‘the nothingness of human matters’” (Blindness 18).\(^\text{11}\) FQ attempts to unify culture through imposing the sensibility of Christianity (Western European culture’s heritage) on readers. Pollard recognizes the cultural implications: “this ambivalence leads Eliot to shift from revitalizing poetry by infusing it with common speech to purifying common speech through the refining power of poetry” (Pollard 101). Pollard speaks critically of FQ’s attempts to “purify” since purification implies imposing “one” standard on “many.” For Pollard, FQ’s homogenous and “correct” diction reveal Eliot’s turn to totalization: “Eliot decides to purify the dialect of the tribe primarily to recover a sense of European cultural unity” (105).

Towards the left are critics who emphasize the fluidity of FQ and its multiple forms. Hugh Kenner recognizes multiple forms in FQ and concludes that it “deals with opposites first falsely, then truly, reconciled, exactly as suicide and martyrdom, superficially identical, were the false and true modes by which Beckett’s plight could be resolved” (Kenner 312). D. H. Moody similarly discerns multiple “instruments” (or poetic figures and voices) that represent different forms of knowledge, and reads this as

\(^{10}\) Rebecca Beasely concurs: FQ evinces a “move away from the ideologically open texts of The Waste Land...to a more didactic form of poetry: rather than analyzing the contemporary situation, this poetry aims to provide answers” (Beasley 113).

\(^{11}\) Colin Gunton recognizes that moderns revolt specifically against figures who impose totalizing structures or standards on others: “unity deity, whether theist or deist, is commonly seen to be at the root of totalitarian or repressive forms of social order” (Gunton 25). In explaining that “much modern social and political thought can be understood as the revolt of the many against the one, and at the same time that of humanity against divinity,” Gunton implies that modern thinkers would interpret a return to belief in a divinity as a return to totalitarianism (27).

\(^{12}\) Martin Warner quotes yet another critical voice with a similar interpretation: “Anthony Julius claims that Four Quartets is the most ‘cogent expression’ of Eliot’s ‘conservatism’ which he sees rooted in the invocation of ‘tradition’, objecting that ‘Eliot does not allow for conflict between traditions, either within an individual or a culture’” (Warner 124).
the poetry’s self-awareness of the limitation of language. Like Hough, Moody concludes that *FQ* seeks a more profound sense of unity through moving towards a different form of wisdom: “Reading it, we are engaged by, and then engaged in, its quest for a comprehensive organization of the world in the mind. Whether we follow it all the way, or find it a dead end, it still extends and refines our common language and understanding, and contributes to our common quest for an intelligible order” (Moody 155). I draw on these critics’ close reading of the poem’s “severalness and singularity,” yet qualify some of their conclusions (142). For their emphasis on the poem’s melding together of diverse aspects still suggests that *FQ* “submerge[s] the many in the one,” which returns us to the common critique of *FQ* (Gunton 28). I hope to demonstrate how *FQ* incorporates the one and the many in the form of a dynamic unity. I therefore argue that the poem recognizes the “void” of non-reference and linguistic slippage as keenly as does *TWL* but responds by seeking not linguistic plenitude but dialogical mediation.

**Eliot’s Prose**

The tensions in Eliot’s poetry - one/many, plenitude/vacancy - can be detected even in his prose. Two of Eliot’s consistent “overwhelming questions” concern the possibility of cultural unity and the integrated individual on the one hand, and the possibility of the subject’s objective knowledge on the other.

Eliot worked towards a degree in philosophy at Harvard. There, he completed a dissertation entitled *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley*. The study is broadly concerned with the relation between objectivity and subjectivity: are experiences common or private; can subjects make them common (i.e. communicate them); and can one attain “objective” knowledge about them, or does the very act of
thought and speech falsify the experience? The topic demonstrates Eliot’s early recognition of the void of non-reference and solipsism. The problem for Eliot was precisely mediation between experience (or sensation) and judgment (or thought).  

Several of the literary essays Eliot wrote in subsequent years return to similar concerns. In his seminal essay, *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1919), Eliot locates the significance of individual artists and texts in their relation to the preceding “Tradition:” “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists” (Prose 38). Works are “measured by each other” (39). Implicit is the attempt to define “many” individuals and texts by their participation in “one” Tradition, or culture. There is a parallel here to *TWL*’s attempt to find a “semantic center” with which to unify its many isolated speakers. Interestingly, Eliot employs scientific language and imagery throughout: “It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science...The analogy was that of the catalyst” (40-41). His vocabulary and methodology recall that of scientific positivism (broadly). At the same time, Eliot recognizes that texts are always defined by preceding texts. He therefore intuits Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism, whereby an individual (or word, or text) is always shaped and defined by its relation to other words.

Eliot’s equally famous essay, *The Metaphysical Poets* (1921), examines the disintegration of the unified self, as *Tradition* did the possible disintegration of the literary canon. Metaphysical poets created unified wholes out of disparate material: “a

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13 Rosenthal explains that at the heart of Eliot’s questions concerning appearance and reality are questions concerning the private and/or public nature of language. If experience cannot be made common then the soul is doomed to the abyss of solipsism (Rosenthal 166).
degree of heterogeneity of material compelled into unity by the operation of the poet’s mind is omnipresent in poetry” (61). On my reading TWL attempts a similar feat. Eliot concludes:

It is something which had happened to the mind of England between the time of Donne or Lord Herbert of Cherbury and the time of Tennyson and Browning; it is the different between the intellectual poet and the reflective poet. Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgating disparate experience; the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary...in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes. (64)

Eliot senses that the individual ought to be wholly integrated, but that modernity has disintegrated her various faculties. Once more, he employs scientific language in the course of his argument: “The poets of the seventeenth century...possessed a mechanism” (64), and “we get something which looks very much like the conceit - we get, in fact, a method” (65). In these, and other, early literary essays Eliot clearly yearns for a unified self and culture, but recognizes modernity’s disruption of past wholeness. Yet Eliot’s mode of signification (i.e. scientific vocabulary and methodology) and subject (integration) are potentially at odds. He holds out nostalgia for the “authentic” self and culture with the one hand, but employs language recalling the very scientific method and

14 One thinks of W. H. Auden’s poem, “Precious Five,” in which he explores the reliability of the human faculties.
mindset that problematized that self on the other. *TWL’s* crisis is prefigured in these early essays.

Finally, many critics point to *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1942) and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948) to demonstrate that the older Eliot attempts to impose his vision of ecclesial order, or totalizing Christian sensibility, on culture. Certainly both works explicitly call for cultural unity. However, its nature is not static but dynamic. Eliot posits the “Christian society” as the only solution for achieving cultural unity while maintaining citizens’ individuality: “Unless [the Christian society] has this aim, we relapse into that conflict between citizenship and church-membership, between public and private morality, which today makes moral life so difficult for everyone, and which in turn provokes that craving for a simplified, monistic solution of statism or racism” (*Christianity* 43). Eliot realizes the paradox outlined by Gunton. A fragmented society with “many” spheres might backfire in its attempt to re-establish “one” source of unity. He reiterates the danger in *Notes*:

> A class division of society planned by an absolute authority would be artificial and intolerable; a decentralisation under central direction would be a contradiction; an ecclesiastic unity cannot be imposed in the hope that it will bring about unity of faith, and a religious diversity cultivated for its own sake would be absurd. The point at which we can arrive, is the recognition that these conditions of culture are ‘natural’ to human beings. (92)

Eliot hardly retreats into the desire for a totalitarian governmental or ecclesial system. Rather than imposing an artificial system of unity on society, he argues that human
society flourishes when structured as a model of dynamic unity enabling true individuality and true unity.

Chapter Summary

In Chapter One I argue that TWL’s speakers’ sexual sterility and isolation are represented formally through their speech patterns. The speakers cannot “make love” because, and as a result of which, they cannot communicate. The “revolt of the many against the one,” or the “break in the covenant between word and world,” prompts social fragmentation, which is in turn embodied literarily through the speakers’ fragmented monologues. Pollard, Moretti, North and Davidson are therefore too optimistic in affirming TWL’s “polyphony,” for despite its many voices the poem despairs over its isolated fragments.

Chapter Two argues that TWL reacts to the “void” of non-reference with nostalgia and an attempt to posit a divine voice, or even “semantic center” (Extraterritorial viii). TWL I and V employ modes of signification generally absent from the rest of the poem. Taken together, the techniques may be provisionally considered as a “negative mystical poetic.” These two sections gesture towards recovered unity in two manners. First, the personae suffer from geographical, and (metaphorically) metaphysical, exile. By expressing what Steiner terms “unhousedness,” or what Lukács calls “transcendent homelessness,” the poem suggests lost presence. Secondly, the poetry gestures towards various possibilities for recovering unity. Through its very gaps, parataxis and lack of coherence TWL places the act of meaning - making in the reader’s domain. More importantly, TWL culminates with the Thunder’s Speech. This voice is finally
ambivalent. It simultaneously enables a kind of dialogue (or call and response), and perpetrates yet greater linguistic fragmentation.

In Chapter Three I argue that \textit{FQ} locates the problem of vacancy in speakers’ attempts to master signifiers. The fifth section of each quartet expresses the inherent limitation of language. The diverse forms and voices noted by Kenner and Moody embody competing forms of logocentric knowledge. The poetry gives voice to “the many” but resists authorizing any “one.” Instead, it evinces a poetics of renunciation whereby it resists three competing forms of knowledge: logocentric rationality, experience and the autonomous text.

Chapter Four proposes that \textit{FQ} responds to the insufficiency of “logocentrism” by seeking to establish dialogue. Self-displacement enables an encounter with the Other, which in turn enables dialogue. \textit{FQ} therefore brings competing voices together, neither isolating nor merging them. Plenitude depends now not on the immediate sign or coincidence of self with self, but on the mediation between speakers. In re-envisioning the redemptive possibilities of language \textit{FQ} suggests a model of dynamic unity best understood as dialogical.

My purpose throughout is two-fold. First, I hope to re-map \textit{TWL} and \textit{FQ} on the presence/absence and one/many spectrum, and therefore re-situate it within the map of modernist studies. Gunton summarizes the crisis of modernity as “An attempt to wrest from God the prerogatives of absolute freedom and infinity that leads to the inversion of Pentecost and what is in effect a new Babel” (Gunton 124). In the course of Eliot’s poetic vocation Babel (polyphony without dialogue) is converted into Pentecost (the explosion of new voices finally enabled to dialogue).
Secondly, I hope to contribute to the conversation about Eliot’s tension between presence/absence a sharpened focus on his poetics. By poetics I mean not his literary or poetic theory, nor his philosophy or theology, but the collection of poetic techniques practically employed in each poem in conjunction with the poems’ themes. In each poem I trace speakers’ voices and dialogues, poetic forms and use of apophatic techniques (paradox, gaps, light imagery, via negativa syntax). A close attention to the poems’ modes of signification and poetic figures enables me to examine how the poems evince their distinct orientations towards a common abyss.

The Stakes

My reading carries implications for the relation between poetic form and forms of knowledge more generally. In the course of my argument I suggest that poetry as a genre informs in readers distinct epistemological forms. Interestingly, a typical critique of FQ (that its form of purity is monological) is not far from what some critics claim about the form of poetry itself. Bakhtin himself soundly excluded poetry from his insights into dialogism:

[P]oetry, striving for maximal purity, works in its own language as if that language were unitary, the only language, as if there were no heteroglossia outside it. Poetry behaves as if it lived in the heartland of its own language territory, and does not approach too closely the borders of this language...If, during an epoch of language crises, the language of poetry does change, poetry immediately canonizes the new language as one that is unitary and singular, as if no other language existed. (Dialogical 399)\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{15} C.f: “Poetic speech in the narrow sense requires a uniformity of all discourses” (Dostoevsky 200).
I plan to demonstrate how *TWL* and *FQ* – although poems, not novels - can be read fruitfully within Bakhtin’s framework. The framework enables us to discuss the philosophical problem of the one and the many in each poem, in addition to the poetic technique whereby the problem is enacted (through speech patterns, voice, and so on).

Martha Nussbaum, a philosopher/literary critic, explores the relation between literary form and forms of knowledge, but also tends to limit her analysis to the genre of the novel. She describes her basic project in *Poetic Justice*:

I want to ask what sense of life their forms themselves embody: not only how the characters feel and imagine, but what sort of feeling and imagining is enacted in the telling of the story itself, in the shape and texture of the sentences, the pattern of the narrative, the sense of life that animates the text as a whole...what sort of feeling and imagining is called into being by the shape of the text as it addresses its imagined reader, what sort of readerly activity is built into the form.

(Nussbaum 4)

Nussbaum does not draw explicitly on Bakhtin, but her work develops his basic insight: “the study of verbal art can and must overcome the divorce between an abstract ‘formal’ approach and an equally abstract ‘ideological’ approach. Form and content in discourse are one” (*Dialogical* 272). My thesis proposes that Bakhtin’s and Nussbaum’s insights, especially when taken together, might be fruitfully applied to the form of poetry in general.

Eliot embodies the philosophical and epistemological problem of the one/many in his poetry largely through attention to discourse and voice (speech patterns, dialogue among personae, grammatical persons, etc.). In Chapters One and Two I argue that *TWL*
responds to its crisis (the void of non-reference and the possibility of solipsism) by exploding into frantic monologues on the one hand and the voice of the Thunder on the other. It polarizes the one and the many without establishing a middle ground. By embodying “linguistic pluralism” while also reaching towards a divine voice whose speech is ambivalent at best, the poetry might be said to evince, if not inculcate in readers, despair. Perhaps one could consider despair as the emotional corollary to the Sybil’s prophetic knowledge. Having looked into the abyss, she responds by saying “I want to die.” In inquiring into the intersection of formal techniques (including discourse) and philosophical concepts, I ask “what sort of readerly activity is built into the form” of each poem.

In Chapters Three and Four I bring the same question to FQ, and conclude that the intersection of its “form and content” (to employ Bakhtin’s vocabulary) inculcates in its readers a different form of knowledge. Its multiple voices, address to the reader, self-displacement and explicit dialogue engage readers in an encounter. My reading of Eliot’s two long poems therefore suggests a posture of reading towards the form of poetry more generally. Whereas many critics are familiar and comfortable with Bakhtin’s and Nussbaum’s approach to the novel, I leave open the door for additional critical engagement with these thinkers when approaching the genre of poetry.

At stake is the ethical dimension of Bakhtin’s dialogism when viewed as a readerly posture. Eliot’s poems, to varying degrees, form in readers a sense of responsibility (i.e. ability to respond). Placing Eliot’s poems in dialogue with each other enables a certain form of readerly activity. In the process of moving from attempted immediacy towards self-renunciation, from recovery of a divine voice to a dialogical
community, readers may be formed towards new ways of encountering, and responding to, “real presences.”

Steiner points to such responsibility, or answerability, as perhaps the greatest salve for a culture living in epilogue, an era literally “after words.” For the “crisis of the word” can lead all too quickly to the silence of the vaunted autonomous individual, and, at the limit, suicide. From modernism onwards, Steiner argues, contemporary culture has sought in various ways to escape its predicament: “Stimulants, narcotics, agents of reverie and of hallucination are known to crack the crust of self-possession, of walled self-sufficiency, and, concomitantly, to enlarge synapses of reception” (Presences 181). Reading TWL and FQ in dialogue with each other, as I attempt here, can perhaps aid in the effort to “crack the crust of self-possession, of walled self-sufficiency.”
Chapter One provides a footnote to the on-going conversation about the nature of fragmentation in \textit{TWL}. Pollard reads the many fragments as \textit{TWL}’s revitalization of poetry with common speech, while Moretti reads them as the polyphony resulting from the collapse of a single authority. On the other end of the spectrum, Graham Hough recognizes in the poem’s diverse forms underlying “larger unities” (\textit{Modernism} 320). I argue that while \textit{TWL} is indisputably polyphonic it is not dialogical. \textit{TWL}’s personae suffer from sexual sterility, represented formally by communicative sterility. The poem develops in relation to the “real absence” of a “semantic center,” or divine presence. As a result, personae are absent to each other and unable to enter into “dialogical interrelationships” (\textit{Dialogical} 50). We can say of \textit{TWL} what Bakhtin does of Tolstoy’s short story “Three Deaths”: “three lives...are internally self-enclosed and do not know one another. There is no more than a purely eternal pragmatic connection between them, necessary for the compositional and thematic unity of the story” (\textit{Dostoevsky} 69). I limit my analysis in Chapter One to arguing that the “voice-collage” in \textit{TWL} constitutes a crisis, and that the poem formally represents this crisis through the speech patterns and voices of its personae. In Chapter Two I examine the ways in which the poetry gestures towards salvation, and the form of salvation necessary for \textit{TWL}.

\textbf{Critical Context}

As outlined in the Introduction, most critics recognize that \textit{TWL} responds in some manner to modernity’s “\textit{break in the covenant between word and world}” and “revolt of
the many against the one.” John Cooper summarizes the lowest common critical denominator in T. S. Eliot and the Politics of Voice: “It has recently become more common to describe the form of The Waste Land as a voice-collage” (Politics 51). Moretti, Pollard and Davidson interpret TWL’s “voice-collage” as a form of liberation. Moretti considers TWL’s “fragments” to be “Eliot’s version of polyphony” (Moretti 186).¹ Charles Pollard generally agrees with critics who “praised Eliot’s ventriloquism as an important part of modernism’s cultural breakthrough” (Pollard 101). Davidson argues that “the fragmentation releases meaning into the play of a human world rich with possibilities” (Davidson 4).

While many critics read TWL’s fragments positively, some qualify their optimism. Pollard recognizes TWL’s ambivalence towards this form of liberation: “Eliot ‘modernizes’ poetic language by interjecting the speech of the class or racial other; however, he mimics these forms of speech ironically because he worries that in representing linguistic fragmentation he may also be contribution to it” (Pollard 87). He provides a much needed qualification: “While Eliot certainly deserves praise for these experiments to update poetry with modern colloquial speech, it is a praise that tends to obscure his own tentativeness about them” (101).² Practically, Pollard, Moretti and Davidson argue that TWL’s fragments constitute its “polyphony.” Yet Pollard recognizes the poem’s ambivalence towards its result. I begin where Pollard leaves off. In fact, I

¹ He continues: “in the twentieth century polyphony frees itself because this anthropocentric framework – which simultaneously sustained and limited it – eventually disintegrates. And anthropocentrism disintegrates because the notion of a unitary individual – upon which it was premised – in turn collapses” (192).
² Pollard realizes: “More often than not, he nullifies or undermines the more revolutionary aspects of these experiments: he cuts the allusions to minstrel songs in The Waste Land, rejects Vivien’s suggestion to particularize the Cockney dialect through phonetic spelling; and abandons Sweeney Agonistes in the middle of choosing it.”
hope to develop his final sentence, in which he points to the “rich possibilities for poetry to represent both the reality of linguistic fragmentation and the dream of a common language” (138). His two clauses might provide the basic rubric for Chapter One and Chapter Two, respectively.

Although not an Eliot critic, Steiner comes perhaps closest to articulating the critical perspective I hope to outline when describing modernist writers in general: “A striking aspect of this language revolution has been the emergence of linguistic pluralism or ‘unhousedness in certain great writers’ that leads to “literature of exile” (Extra-Terrestrial viii). Steiner looks past the freedom of “linguistic pluralism” and sees its isolation. TWL’s fragments suggest that it, too, can be read as “literature of exile,” not from a geographical but a metaphysical home. My contention is that we can read Eliot’s poetic vocation as a response to the conflicting realization of “unhousedness” and the nostalgia for the possibility of unity. The poems pulse between “linguistic fragmentation and the dream of a common language.”

**Voices, voices everywhere**

*TWL* incorporates multiple voices but few successful dialogues (until “What the Thunder Said,” which I will discuss in Chapter Two). In order to better understand its linguistic landscape I will trace a recurring communicative pattern developed by *TWL*’s personae. Personae frequently recall moments of communion (love) in which they communicate, but typically from the context of present isolation. “The Burial of the Dead” juxtaposes multiple different voices, including those of two aristocrats recalling lost love, personae from Richard Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde* recalling Ezekiel.
TWL’s introductory lines prepare readers for the theme of nostalgia: “breeding/Lilacs out of the dead land.” In his guide to Eliot’s poetry, B. C. Southam notes that “Lilacs” “may be an allusion to Walt Whitman’s elegiac poem ‘When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom’d’” (Southam 105). In addition to introducing the theme of nostalgia for unity with nature, self and lovers “Lilacs” and TWL are both “post-war poem[s].” As such, they emerge from a historical context of exile and loss (106). The themes of nostalgia for lost love and current exile are intimately interwoven throughout TWL, but particularly in TWL I. I employ De Man’s understanding of Romanticism’s ontology of presence when discussing nostalgia in TWL. De Man articulates an aspect of Romantic aesthetics against which many modernist poets reacted, so his definition is appropriate. For De Man, the Romantic aesthetic typically longed for coincidence between sign and signified (Blindness 12).

Marie remembers fondly a moment of communion with her lover, whom she has presumably since lost: “We stopped in the colonnade,/ And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,/ And drank coffee, and talked for an hour” (TWL I). The natural imagery, particularly her line “went on in sunlight,” conveys a sense of nostalgia for unity typical of Romantic aesthetics (as described by De Man). Interestingly, her memories are comprised primarily of her natural surroundings and the communication that passed

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3 Harold Bloom goes so far as to describe the “poignance of exile, [as] always Eliot’s true mode” (Comprehensive 12).

4 It is in this sense that I employ the term “immediacy” of the sign, and transparency to readers: “a predominant theme of pietistic origin in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature, functions indeed as the figura of a privileged kind of language. Its outward appearance receives its beauty from an inner glow (or feu sacre) to which it is so finely attuned that, far from hiding it from sight, it gives it just the right balance of opacity and transparency” (Blindness 13).
between herself and her lover (“we talked for an hour”). Indeed, she recalls his precise words to her from childhood: “‘He said, Marie,/ Marie, hold on tight.’”

Two conclusions can be drawn from this scene. First, Marie associates communion (i.e. a relationship of love) with communication (i.e. making common). The inverse suggestion is that part of the disorder in TWL’s relationships stems from speakers’ inability to communicate with each other. This leads to the second point, which is that Marie, and later personae, seek and find the conditions for communication when they leave the city. The movement is ambivalent, for it gestures both to (stereo-)typically Romantic nostalgia, and to a profoundly modernist sense of “transcendent homelessness” (to employ György Lukács’ famous phrase). The ambivalence reveals TWL’s tension between recognizing absence and desiring presence.

Marie’s voice is (metaphorically) either interrupted or completed by a prophetic voice speaking words from the book of Ezekiel: “What are the roots that clutch...I will show you fear in a handful of dust.” The voice prophesies the condition of the Waste Land. It is a land of “stony rubbish,” where branches cannot “grow” and human kind is reduced to a “handful of dust.” Images of sterility continue throughout TWL. Marie’s aristocratic voice recalls “high” civilization, replete with the Hofgarten, “read[ing] in the winter,” and a visit to the archduke’s. But the prophetic voice speaks of sterility throughout the land, and implicit sexual sterility among its inhabitants. The voice addresses not Marie but “Son of man.” In Ezekiel the “Son of Man” is Christ, the savior. TWL also seeks a savior figure throughout, the Hanged Man in the Tarot deck. The prophet’s voice addresses the only person absent from the poem (Madame Sosostris admits, “I do not find/ The Hanged Man”). The voice implies lost presence. Although the
voices apparently come from different economic, temporal and geographical contexts, they each speak either to themselves or to a person not present. We can already say of these voices what Bakhtin does of characters’ voices in Tolstoy’s short story: “they do not hear and do not answer one another. There are not and cannot be any dialogic relationships among them” (Dialogical 70). Marie and the prophet from Ezekiel “do not hear and do not answer one another.”

The prophetic voice gives way to lines from Richard Wagner’s Tristan and Isolde. Translated, the verse reads: “The wind blows fresh/ To the Homeland/ My Irish Girl/ Where are you lingering?” The section further evokes Romantic nostalgia by incorporating Wagner’s lines. In “The Poet and Silence,” Steiner argues that Wagner epitomizes German Romanticism, in which poets attempt to transcend words and enter into the pure immediacy of music: “The fullest statement of this hope, of the submission of the word to this musical ideal, can be found in German Romanticism” (Language 43). Steiner elaborates on Wagner’s contribution to German Romanticism: “[Wagner] made of the relationships between language and music the crux of his vision....It brings with it...the exultation of the poet at being almost a musician...but also a sad condescension to the verbal medium, a despair at being restricted to a form of expression thinner, narrower, much nearer the surface” (44). Steiner notices in German Romanticism the emergence of severe ambivalence, if not “despair,” over the limitations of the word. Poets both long for immediacy and transparency and realize its impossibility. Significantly, in TWL lines from Tristan are juxtaposed with those from Ezekiel. Both allude to the distance between humanity and divinity from within drastically different cultural contexts. All three voices
so far have acknowledged exile from the presence of the gods, while admitting desire for return.

After the voice from Ezekiel and from Wagner the stanza resumes in the voice of another lover:

“Oh you gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
They called me the hyacinth girl.”
- Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet ...

Looking into the heart of light, the silence.

The male lover’s recollection has much in common with Marie’s. He recalls his lover’s precise words (“‘You have me hyacinths first a year ago; / They called me the hyacinth girl’”) and the natural landscape in which the moment of communication was located (“the Hyacinth garden”). Like Marie, then, he associates communion (i.e. a relationship of love) with communication. One can read the persona as Marie’s lover. The “Hyacinth garden” is possibly the Hofgarten; Marie’s hair is wet from “a shower of rain;” and the “heart of light” is described by Marie in saying, “[we] went on in Sunlight.” This reading illustrates what is true throughout TWL. Without encountering each other in dialogue, the four voices in the very first stanza of TWL I each express exile from the possibility of communion and communication.

While TWL is profoundly polyphonic, its personae are “internally self-enclosed and do not know one another” (Dostoevsky 69). Each voice presumes the possibility of communication, though it is never realized. Marie recalls the words of her past lover; the
prophetic voice presumes a divine voice (“And he said unto me, Son of man, stand upon thy feet, and I will speak unto thee. And the spirit entered into me when he spake unto me, and set me upon my feet, that I heard him that spake unto me” (Ezekiel 2:1-2)); in the fragment from Wagner’s opera the lonely speaker assumes the existence of his lost lover (“My Irish girl/ Where are you lingering”); and finally, the last lover recalls the words of his lover. The section sets up a pattern developed throughout the poem as a whole, perhaps the paradigmatic pattern of communication for the citizens of the Waste Land.

Bakhtin writes of Tolstoy’s characters that “an internal connection, a connection between consciousnesses, is not present here” (Dostoevsky 69). He continues:

There are not and cannot be any dialogic relationships among them. They neither argue nor agree. But all three personages, with their self-enclosed worlds, are united, juxtaposed and made meaningful to one another in the author’s unified field of vision and consciousness that encompasses them...the author, who is located outside them and takes advantage of his external position to give them a definitive meaning, to finalize them. (70)

The personae in TWL are “united, juxtaposed and made meaningful to one another in the author’s unified field of vision.” The juxtapositions are effective in part because they reveal the essential similarity underlying the apparent difference of each of TWL’s voices. The experience of isolation becomes the common experience between each speaker. We can conclude of TWL that “despite the multiple levels in Tolstoy’s story, it contains neither polyphony nor (in our sense) counterpoint. It contains only one cognitive subject, all else being merely objects of his cognition” (71). Bakhtin’s observation about communicative patterns correlates with Gunton’s concerning the philosophical sensibility.
of modernity. The strong backlash of modernity’s “revolt of the many against the one” works to homogenize individual experience: “The heart of the paradox of the modern condition is that a quest for the freedom of the many has eventuated in new forms of slavery to the one,” for “the fragmentation of experience which is the outcome of modern displacement is alienating and heteronomous, not liberating” (Gunton 34, 35). While *TWL* incorporates multiple voices from different genders, economic classes, geographical regions and sources of literature, the voices have in common “one” experience of isolation that inhibits dialogue.

The final stanza in “The Burial of the Dead” continues the pattern, with a variation. The speaker addresses “Stetson,” and the latter never replies. B. C. Southam glosses *TWL*’s reference to Mylae: “this reference (assimilating the recent World War and Mylae) underlines ‘the essential sameness of all wars’” (Southam 114). Again, Gunton’s pattern can be discerned in these lines. In addition, the speaker’s rhetorical question about “the corpse” associates war with inability to communicate: “‘The corpse you planted last year in your garden,/ ‘Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?/ ‘Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?’” Southam points out that “in ancient fertility rites images of the gods ere buried in the fields” (Southam 114). War results in the ultimate silence of death, but also the silence following the absence of the gods (the fertility gods have been buried). Although “waste” in the Waste Land issues from, and leads to, general brokenness, my particular focus is on its repercussions on speech patterns and speakers’ voices. It is not irrelevant, then, that Stetson never replies to the speaker. The progression tacitly associates war and death with communicative failure.

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5 *C.f.*: “one of the roots of modern developments was the belief that human liberation was to be found in disengagement from any external grounding of life, whether in God or some metaphysical philosophy such as Platonism” (Gunton 34).
In his last line the speaker demands a response: "‘You! hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable, - mon frère!’" The line comes from Charles Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal*: “It is boredom!... /—You know him, reader, this delicate monster,/ —Hypocrite reader— my twin – my brother!” (Baudelaire 2). Baudelaire’s collection of poetry addresses the (evil, or ill) fruits borne by inhabitants of a modern city. By incorporating this line – and indeed Baudelaire’s voice - *TWL* points to “the sin of ennui, boredom heightened to a profound spiritual dissatisfaction” (Southam 115). In addition, the line implicates the reader in the spiritual desolation and sterility characterizing the poem itself. The section’s “voice-collage” ironically suggests one underlying experience common to all speakers and even readers. At the very moment of expressing commonality and attempting a dialogue, however, the speaker employs another’s voice in another language (French). Practically, English-speaking readers are isolated from the speaker’s attempted encounter because of his use of a different language. The practical necessity for translation suggests a more profound sense of exile from language itself. In short, the dramatic scene associates the isolation and ennui of modern urban existence with the difficulty of communicating and establishing relationships.

“A Game of Chess” introduces two more personae who similarly suffer from isolation, reflected in part by their inability to communicate with each other. The scene is set likely in an upper middle class flat in London. By moving to this location the dramatic scene juxtaposes “the sacred and the profane” (Southam 116). The poem incorporates new voices, but from the beginning suggests their experience might be common to all the other voices in the Waste Land. As the stage is set the narrator alludes to sexual perversion or sterility: “The change of Philomel, by the barbarous kind/ So rudely forced;
yet there the nightingale / Filled all the desert with inviolable voice / And still she cried, and still the word pursues, / ‘Jug Jug’ to dirty ears.” Southam explains the basic tenor of the dramatic scene, quoting Hayward: “The contrast between the life of the great and that of the common people in a sterile and despoiled land. In Middleton’s play, the game of chess conceals seduction and rape. In the myth, the curse on the land follows the rape of the girls at the court of the Fisher King. Lust without love” (Southam 116). We might add lust without communication.

It is hardly necessary to demonstrate further how this scene resembles others in that the personae suffer from broken relationships (associated with sexual infertility). More to the point, the relational disorder is represented and aggravated by a communicative disorder. Tortured by the isolation and boredom resulting from the vapid relationship the woman demands a response of the man, perhaps her husband or her lover:

...Stay with me.

Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.

What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?

I never know what you are thinking. Think.

The speaker bases her hope for restored relationships (“Stay with me”) in the possibility of dialogue (“Speak to me”). The tragedy of the dramatic scene is that the speakers never achieve dialogue.

The man employs language to think but not to establish communicative ground with the woman. He responds to her question but not aloud (the absence of quotation marks indicates his silence): “I think we are in rats’ alley / Where the dead men lost their
bones.” (Reference to the First World War’s trench warfare again suggests a correlation between war and silence.) The speech (or lack thereof) pattern is repeated:

'What is that noise?'

The wind under the door.

'What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?'

Nothing again nothing.

'Do

'You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember

'Nothing?'

Both personae hear the same noise, yet they do not communicate it to each other since they are “self-enclosed and dead” (Dostoevsky 70). The characters are isolated from each other because they do not dialogue, yet they experience a common sense of “Nothing again nothing.”

_TWL_ toys with two kinds of nothing. The second will be examined in Chapter Two. In _Blindness and Insight_ De Man articulates one form of nothing, and in particular how it relates to Steiner’s “break in the covenant between word and world:”

The sign is devoid of substance, not because it has to be a transparent indicator that should not mask a plenitude of meaning, but because the meaning itself is empty; the sign should not offer its own sensory richness as a substitute for the void that it signifies...Rousseau’s theory of representation is not directed toward meaning as presence and plenitude but toward meaning as void. (_Blindness_ 127)

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6 His language resembles Steiner’s when he describes the “discrepancy exists in everyday language, in the impossibility of making the actual expression coincide with what has to be expressed, of making the actual sign coincide with what it signifies” (_Blindness_ 11)
At the heart of TWL resides a deep horror over this “void.” As Gertrude Stein helpfully explains, “There is no there there” (Stein 289). Signs point to the one essential and underlying reality of nothingness itself: “Here the human self has experienced the void within itself and the invented fiction, far from filling the void, asserts itself as pure nothingness, our nothingness stated and restated by a subject that is the agent of its own instability” (Blindness 19). On the one hand, then, each persona is “internally self-enclosed” and approaches Eliot’s personal Hell of solipsism and isolation (Bakhtin 69). The “voice-collage” never becomes a dialogue. On the other hand, each speaker suffers from the same common fear and limitation; the void. TWL appears to evince the paradox Gunton notices at the heart of modernity.

The couple’s use of pronouns in TWL II formally embodies their dialogical predicament. The woman begins speaking in the first person singular “my/me,” moves to the second person singular “you,” returns to the first, and only at the end attempts the first person plural: “‘What shall we do to-morrow?/ What shall we ever do?’” The man similarly employs the first person singular throughout until the very end when he switches to the first person plural: “we shall play a game of chess/ Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.” Both speakers employ first person plural – the grammatical mode that assumes community – only to express a sense of ennui and despair. Even then, they never dialogue but only admit their shared predicament.

The second section in TWL II re-iterates the pattern yet again. A working class woman gossips aloud about a conversation she had with Lil in which she warns Lil to make herself sexually attractive for Albert, Lil’s husband returning from war. The theme of sexual frustration and sterility continues, suggesting the more profound problem of
relational impotence. All the readers know of Lil’s relationship with her husband is their sexual life. The relationship is not defined by the couple’s communications.\footnote{Interestingly, the gossip’s final words (“Goonight, goonight”) recall Ophelia in Hamlet. Southam glosses these lines: “Hamlet has accused Ophelia of being a whore and telling her to retire to a ‘nunnery’ – in Shakespeare’s time, the slang word for a brothel” (Southam 120). The allusion suggests that the gossip herself suffers from sexual disorder of some kind. No speakers in the exchange escape this fate.}

The section formally embodies the dramatic scene’s theme of relational disorder and sterility. The gossip recalls her dialogue with Lil: “And no more can’t I, I said...there’s others will, I said./ Oh is there, she said. Something o’ that, I said...It’s them pills...” and so on. The lines involve a few relationships: Lil and her husband’s, Lil and the gossip’s, Lil and the “chemist,” Lil and George, and the gossip and Bill, Lou and May. Despite the many personae involved, readers only actually hear the gossip’s voice. She casts Lil’s speech into her own accent and expressions. Even when she addresses the other people in the pub (saying “Goonight”) readers never hear their voices. Practically, then, she delivers a monologue. While the poem is polyphonic in that it incorporates multiple voices, the speech patterns of the personae are radically monological.\footnote{Gyorg Lukacs realizes that in a world that has lost God the possibility of genuine dialogue is diminished: “The language of the absolutely lonely man is lyrical, i.e. monological” (Lukacs 45).}

The dramatic scene incorporates another voice. The bartender periodically interrupts the gossip’s monologue with the words, “HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME.” The phrase is a standard phrase employed during a pub’s closing time. Yet the poem employs this common phrase to suggest the ultimate closing time: death. This transcendent voice breaks into the mundane speech of the gossip, just as the voice from the prophet Ezekiel broke into the Romantic ruminations of Marie in TWL I. Yet even a transcendent voice does not enter into dialogue with other speakers, or provide common ground on which for speakers to dialogue. The threat of impending death is associated
with the paratactic development of the lines. None of the voices in *TWL* II are placed in communication with each other.

“The Fire Sermon” likewise incorporates multiple voices but no dialogue. Once again, the section recurrently addresses the theme of sexual disorder and sterility. The “Nymphs” who have “departed” allude both to Edmund Spenser’s “Prothalamion,” a poem celebrating marriage, and to “modern ‘nymphs,’ accompanied by their boy friends in cars, jolly fellows and their English marionettes” (Southam 121). The image mixes the hope of love and the crass and impersonal relationships that characterize inhabitants of the modern city. The “waters of Leman” are likewise ambivalent. They refer to Leman Lake in Lake Geneva, next to which Eliot worked on his poem (Kermode 101). In addition, Leman alludes to the Biblical story of the Israelites’ “exile in Babylonia and yearning for their homeland...‘The waters of Leman’ is a phrase associated with the fires of lust, from the meaning of mean as mistress or prostitute” (Southam 121). Like the image of the nymphs, this image mixes the possibility of, and nostalgia for, whole and healthy relationships with the recognition of utter loss.

Many more allusions to sexual perversion have been well recorded. I need not catalogue them here. What is of particular interest is how the theme of sexual, and thus relational, disorder is formally embodied in the communicative pattern of the personae. The speakers’ speech are typically one-sided. Later, a speaker recounts his encounter with Mr. Eugenides, a “Smyrna merchant:”

Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant

Unshaven, with a pocket full of currants

C.i.f. London: documents at sight,
Mr. Eugenides propositions the speaker. The potential homosexual relationship provides another example in this context of a relationship that (literally) does not bear fruit. Once again, the dialogue is not dramatized in the present tense but recounted by the speaker. Moreover, the speaker emphasizes Mr. Eugenides’ physical appearance more than their personal encounter (“Unshaven, with a pocket full of currants/ C.i.f. London: documents at sight”).

Critics all agree that *TWL* is characterized by a “voice-collage.” However, they disagree over the nature of the voices’ fragments. On the far left, are Franco Moretti and Charles Pollard who read *TWL* as the successful “revolt of the many against the one.” On the far right are critics who read the multiple fragments as the expression of utter loss of unity internal to the poem. Ruth Nevo articulates this perspective: “there is no one point of view, no single style, idiom, register, or recurrent and therefore linking linguistic device which could define a subject, in the sense of a dominant speaking or projecting persona” (Nevo 455). Nevo recognizes what can lie on the far side of the “revolt of the one against the many.” By extension, loss of “a single style, idiom, register” accounts at least in part for the absence of dialogue between *TWL*’s many voices. On my reading both critical perspectives perceive an aspect of *TWL*. Critical disagreement testifies to the crisis internal to *TWL* itself. *TWL* lives out Gunton’s thesis about modernity: “the assertion of the rights of the many has paradoxically, dialectically perhaps, achieved the

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9 The kind of knowledge evinced here is not deeply personal. The speaker describes Mr. Eugenides from the outside. Speakers’ postures towards each other carry epistemological implications, as Bakhtin was well aware.
opposite, the subversion of the many by new and in some cases demonic versions of the one” (Gunton 33). The poem swings from radical “linguistic pluralism” and polyphony to radical unity bordering on monism.

Michael Edwards holds that TWL’s “voice-collage” primarily signifies its sense of isolation and solipsism: “the most intimate loss that the poem is concerned with, [is] the loss of a single, just speech” (Edwards 107). Stèphane Mallarmé, a poet who clearly influenced Eliot, is motivated by a similar observation: “Languages are imperfect because multiple; the supreme language is missing...the diversity of languages on earth means that no one can utter words which would bear the miraculous stamp of Truth Herself Incarnate” (Mallarmé 38). Mallarmé senses the “crisis of the word” and responds by desiring an immediate and transcendent master signifier. TWL responds in despair to the “revolt of the many against the one,” and finally “enacts a fall of language into broken words” (111).

When the speaker in TWL III sits down to weep by Leman, then, the poetry hints at its orientation towards the “loss of a single, just speech.” The poem alludes to the Babylonian exile in which Israelites were exiled from the promised land and from the Temple (in which dwelt the presence of God). Eleanor Cook, drawing on Augustine, recognizes an implicit but powerful link between the Babylonian exile and the problem in TWL: “Babylon may thus also be called ‘confusion,’ and ‘punishment in the form of a change of language’ is the fate of a Babel” (Cook 57). Cook and Edwards read TWL’s crisis as a crisis over the loss of a language with which to dialogue. The poem follows the example of Mallarmé, a poet whose signature is typically discerned in FQ. Mallarmé responds to “linguistic pluralism” by attempting a form of “pure poetry:” “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” (Mallarmé 43). TWL finally responds to its crisis by fashioning “a single new word which is total in itself and foreign to the language – a kind of incantation.”

Silence, slippage and suicide

In TWL II the dramatic scene in the pub exemplifies the end-result of living in a Waste Land. The bartender’s impersonal phrase, “HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME,” alludes to the final end-time: death. The phrase (hinting at the voice of the transcendent) interrupts the gossip. Finally, the gossip follows its directive and leaves, though not before wishing “Goonight” to all her “friends.” The line alludes to a scene in Hamlet where Ophelia wishes goodbye to each of her friends by tossing them select flowers. She finally admits the utter isolation to which she has come. Love (i.e. communion) has been thwarted, and so has communication. She essentially delivers a monologue in her own private idiom: “There’s a fennel for you, and columbines: there’s rue for you; and here’s some for me...” (Hamlet 4.6.157-163). The result of such isolation is ultimate silence:

George Steiner realizes the profound correlation between the inability to communicate and death: “For deconstruction, however, there can be no foundational speech-act, no saying immune from un-saying” (Presences 119). The constant potential for “un-saying” leads either to “nothingness” or to the intense desire to relocate a “semantic center.” Yet, as Gunton makes clear, this desire itself finally implodes: “The desire for absolute singularity cannot be ruled out. But neither can the dread of solitude.

10 Indeed, Hamlet itself ends with an equivocation concerning silence and death: “the rest is silence.” The line might be applied to TWL with all its ambiguity. The result of the multiple breakdowns in the poem is indeed silence, but perhaps the poem also comes to a point where silence – cessation from the attempt to communicate – would be ultimate rest.
The rupture of Narcissus is, tautologically, that of suicide” (Gunton 137). If “nothingness” is the fundamental reality of *TWL* then death does not constitute a substantive evil to resist. Indeed, this may be the deepest horror of all, and one not missed by Steiner: “Deconstruction has nothing to say of death. For death, says De Man, is merely ‘a displaced name for a linguistic predicament’” (*Presences* 148). As it teeters on the brink of the void, *TWL* cannot avoid staring into one of its potential fates: the pandemonium of Babel.

**Conclusion**

*TWL* thematically and formally evinces its sense of damnation resulting from, and leading to, “linguistic pluralism.” Perhaps the poem finally takes up the garbs of the Sybil. Like the Sybil, the poem constitutes an enigmatic prophet whose knowledge brings with it the desire to die. Harold Bloom recognizes the poem’s internal misery, and finally claims: “No one is saved in *The Waste Land*” (*Comprehensive* 10). Yet the poem does point to salvation peculiarly suited to its form of damnation. It is to the possibility of salvation that we shall now turn.

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11 Gunton might go so far as to argue that they lead to “murder:” “Negatively, the Fall leads to ever more disastrous breaches of communion, culminating in murder...The centrality of the two dimensions of communion is symbolized especially by Babel, according to which breach of communion with God leads to the dispossession of that most central means of communion and communication, language. With the Fall, language divides rather than relates” (Gunton 216).
The Presence in the Absence of Presence:
Salvation in *The Waste Land*

“I break open stars and find nothing, and again nothing, and then a word in a foreign tongue.” Elizabeth Borcher

In Chapter One I argued that the “voice-collage” that some critics read as *TWL*’s liberating polyphony actually perpetrates its primary problematic: inability to communicate leading to utter isolation. While *TWL* thematically and formally acknowledges its existential “unhousedness,” it responds by attempting to re-establish a source of unity, and even a divine presence.\(^1\) In addition to formally enacting Babel, *TWL* employs a “negative mystical” poetics to gesture towards a transcendent presence residing in the very experience of absence, and finally gestures towards a divine voice. In sum, if “the most intimate loss that the poem is concerned with, [is] the loss of a single, just speech,” then salvation may require recovery of a “single, just speech” (Edwards 107). The ultimate salvation for *TWL* is not only a single speech, however, but the possibility of a divine voice that provides grounds for dialogue.

**Critical Context**

Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane claim that all modernist poets are faced with the overwhelming question of how to proceed in the absence of a “semantic center:” “How then can the poet break out of this linguistic bankruptcy and deal with the experience of aridity and nothingness without self-compromise?” (*Modernism* 332). Several Eliot critics are motivated by their desire to answer this question of *TWL*. Some

\(^1\) George Steiner traces different modernists’ reactions to the “language revolution:” “the retreat from the word”....directly counterpoints the new linguistics, the new attempts – philosophical, psychological, poetic – to establish a semantic center” (*Extraterritorial* viii). In some respects *TWL* can be read as Eliot’s attempt to “establish a semantic center,” at least a metaphorical one.
argue that \textit{TWL} constructs, or points to, unity implicit in the experience of “linguistic bankruptcy.” Harriet Davidson structures her book around this question, a question that she considers central to \textit{TWL}: “what is needed is a way to ground ontologically the contextual/diacritical view of language if we are not to be trapped in linguistic relativism or solipsism. This was, I believe, a project of Eliot’s” (Davidson 32). For Davidson, \textit{TWL} responds to its linguistic crisis by relocating meaning in language itself: “The loss of the self combined with the loss of God mourned by earlier poets results in a world which is non-romantic, non-existential, and non-psychological. Instead, we now have what, since Heidegger, has been called the linguistic universe...the hermeneutic universe” (7). While Davidson’s argument provides an insightful answer to Bradbury’s and McFarlane’s problematic, it does not deal sufficiently with the profound impetus evinced in \textit{TWL V} towards an external ground for structural unity enabling dialogue. In her article, \textit{The Waste Land: Ur-Text of Deconstruction}, Ruth Nevo provides another answer to the well-worn question, “Have we a whole at all?” (Nevo 457). She ultimately answers in the affirmative:

\textit{[TWL]} consists of a plethora of signifiers in complete discomplementarity with any set or sequence of recognizably related signifieds in a represented world. It is an apogee of fragmentation and discontinuity, referring, if at all, only to itself. But this self that is constituted by what it is not, its presence is made up of its absences, its gaps and ellipses are the fountainheads of its significance, its disorder its order. (456)

\footnote{Davidson recognizes that \textit{TWL}'s ontology is built around the very experience of absence: “I mean the absence of a transcendent foundation, center, and origin – whether subjective or objective – for our being” (Davidson 3).}

\footnote{C. f. The poem creates a “diacritical system of the poem whereby meaning is determined not by reference, but by the relation between elements in a system” (1).}
Nevo attempts to find the key for *TWL*’s unity hidden among its fragments. She finally argues that the poem represents the “unconscious,” specifically, the reader’s unconscious in the process of reading.\(^4\) Michael North also finds that *TWL*’s fragmentation inversely enables grounds for unity. For him unity comes in the form of reconciliation of opposites: “[Eliot] would have to find a form that could be distinguished from the false, repressive unity that is the counterpart of modern fragmentation.... *The Waste Land* vividly illustrates the difference between the necessary connection of opposites like worker and crowd, fragment and form, and a reconciliation of them” ([Politics](94)). North’s model does not allow for the irreducible incommunicability between the fragments, nor for *TWL*’s profound need for dialogue. Finally, Clive Scott offers a similar interpretation:

Eliot’s *Waste Land* is positively founded on this principle; it consists of a variety of lyric fragments, some of a nostalgic traditional kind, some Surrealist dream-songs, interspersed with passages of dramatic realism and satire. In poetry of this kind the larger unities are not visible on the surface or present in any readily analyzable structure. They are given by a slow underground process of psychic development, often only discernable in retrospect. ([Modernism](360))

This reading skirts the issue of solipsism, however. I take up aspects of these various insights to argue that *TWL* gestures towards two forms of unity.

**Negative Theology and “negative mysticism”**

In “The Burial of the Dead” and “What the Thunder Said” absence signifies more than the “void” of non-reference. The sections develop a poetic in which nothing implies

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\(^4\) *C. f.*: “Ah, but there is a language which this mode of symbolic phantasmagoria resembles, the language of the unconscious, with its condensations, substitutions, displacements, and are then challenged to find an interpretative key to this dream, we cannot. Like dreams this text has no beginning or end. It could begin anywhere” ([Nevo](456)).
the absence of something, which in turn implies the possibility of divine presence. First, the sections’ nostalgia as explored in Chapter One assumes the past existence of presence. Second, the poem thematically and formally gestures towards ineffable presence in the experience of felt absence. In this case, the poetry draws not on the German Romantic tradition but on that of negative theology, and Lukács’ “negative mysticism.” In both cases, we can read the poetry’s gesture towards unity in light of Gunton’s argument. *TWL*’s “revolt of the many against the one” prompts it to reestablish a new source of unity.

I return to *TWL* I to demonstrate that even dramatic scenes that underscore the fragmentation of relationships imply the possibility of unity. In *TWL* I the line “Memory and desire” points to the possibility of presence within absence. Memory implies loss (absence) but the existence at one time of what was lost. Lovers recall lost communion (and communication) from a predicament of present displacement. The dramatic scene hints towards a sublime experience of unity, or even immediacy, with the Other, nature and self:5 These categories are helpful because they enable us to read *TWL*’s problem of sexual sterility and relational frustration according to its linguistic landscape. The problem of isolation and metaphysical homelessness is formally represented, at least in part, by non-coincidence of signifier with signified, self with self, word with world. Paul de Man provides a helpful vocabulary for the distinctly modern[ist] problem of non-coincidence: “a fundamental discrepancy always prevents the observer from coinciding

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5 Cleanth Brooks explains that modern poets resembled their Romantic forerunners in their attempt to deal with the chasm between subjective experience and communal life: “if men could now find in their own subjective life something that corresponds to what Mr. Hall calls the ‘old objective life of shared experience,’ then they would have re-established a rapport with nature and restored the community of values, the loss of which wasted the land” (Brooks xxvii). The “wasted” land likely refers to Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. 
fully with the consciousness he is observing. The same discrepancy exists in everyday language, in the impossibility of making the actual expression coincide with what has to be expressed, of making the actual sign coincide with what it signifies” (*Blindness* 12).

*TWL’s* salvation for the problem of “non-coincidence” (and fragmentation) comes in part from recovering the possibility of communion with another. The male lover in *TWL* II experiences a moment of communion in his very failure to communicate:

- 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, and I knew nothing,

Looking into the heart of light, the silence.

*Oed’ und leer das Meer.*

These lines employ syntax and imagery that disappear from the poem until “What the Thunder Said,” though they return far more fully developed and ubiquitous in *FQ*. Whereas in Chapter One we noticed how silence frequently follows linguistic failure, silence here indicates the fulfillment of words. The poetry points to a second kind of “nothing.” The lines incorporate the sensibility not so much of the German Romantic tradition, but of negative theology, exemplified by medieval mystics. For mystics, divine presence is ineffable and therefore can best be intuited through silence. George Steiner explains: "It is just because we can go no further, because speech so marvelously fails us, that we experience the certitude of a divine meaning surpassing and enfolding ours" (*Language* 39). When the persona in *TWL* says “I could not/Speak, and my eyes failed...Looking into the heart of light, the silence,” he employs a poetic technique for
approaching or apprehending the ineffable divine. Eliot recognizes in Dante an example of “mystical experience,” and notices that Dante employs “a masterful use of that imagery of light which is the form of certain types of mystical experience” (Prose 90). Steiner articulates the profoundly different orientation towards silence stemming from apophaticism: “it is decisively the fact that language does have its frontiers, that it borders on three other modes of statement – light, music and silence – which gives proof of a transcendent presence in the fabric of the world. It is just because we can go no further, because speech so marvelously fails us, that we experience the certitude of a divine meaning surpassing and enfolding ours. What lies beyond man’s word is eloquent of God” (Language 39).

_TWL_ I employs light, silence and linguistic and sensory “failure” to point to an ineffable and divine presence. The syntax “neither...nor” is employed only in _TWL_ I and V, although again it re-appears with far greater frequency in _FQ_. The sentence construction formally embodies the methodology of the _via negativa_, or the way of negation. St. John of the Cross articulates the _via negativa_ in his book The Dark Night of the Soul. I outline St. John’s project in my Introduction, but it would be helpful to quote some lines in order to exemplify the stylistic similarities with _TWL_. In dry times souls “neither speak nor find any language concerning [them]” (St. John 50). St. John thematically and formally outlines a way to approach the ineffable divine in the absence of a “semantic center.” Likewise, the lover’s lines in _TWL_ II employs “neither...nor” syntax to embody a way to gesture towards a presence in the absence of coincidence of word and world. When he says “I was neither/ Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,” he comes as close as any persona to pointing to an ineffable presence. Marie’s recollection
of the time with her lover when they “went on in sunlight” suggests that she underwent a similar experience.

Stepping back from this close reading we can see how far we have come from De Man’s “Nothing” of non-reference as experienced by the couple in “A Game of Chess.” The man and woman in TWL II are unable to establish either love (and sexual fertility) or communication. Although they remain isolated from each other, each senses the same void of “nothing again nothing.” By contrast, the man and woman in TWL I experience the “nothing” that signifies an ineffable presence. The man “fails” to speak or see because the signified (what he encounters) so far transcends and exceeds the sign.

However, while the lover in TWL I, and maybe Marie, experiences unity with an ineffable presence this unity does not enable him to enter into dialogue with his lover. Recovery of divine presence apparently does not bring with it the possibility for dialogical relationships. If anything, the lover’s apprehension of “Nothing...the silence” suggests that his consciousness merges with “Nothing.” Nothing becomes immediately accessible to him. Eliot may reveal his interest in Eastern philosophy in the monist tendencies implicit in this line. The writer in Isha, the first section of The Upanishads, asks, “For him who sees everywhere oneness, how can there be delusion or grief?” (Upanishads 4). The “oneness” of Brahman, the essential reality, neglects preserving the individual identity of “the many.” The pendulum perhaps over-corrects by swinging from fragmentation to monism. “The Burial of the Dead,” like the rest of the poem, evinces keen ambivalence towards “nothing.” It simultaneously sees both the nothingness caused by exile from presence, and the nothingness of ineffable reality.
The section formally embodies ambivalence by incorporating lines from the German language. Marie’s two memories are spatially separated by the line: “Bin gar keine Russin, stamm’ aus Litauen, echt deutsch,” translated, “I am not Russian at all; I come from Lithuania, I am a real German.” Marie simultaneously claims her own authenticity and (genealogical) originality, and her current “unhousedness.” Just as the poem posits authenticity it requires translation, and thus (perhaps metaphorically) displacement and loss of immediacy.

The second instance of German verse is employed to the same effect. German lines from Wagner’s opera *Tristan and Isolde* interpolate the voices of both lovers (perhaps each other’s lovers), translated:

The wind blows fresh
To the Homeland
My Irish Girl
Where are you lingering?

Chapter One outlined how Wagner epitomizes German Romanticism, at least for Steiner. Yet incorporating Wagner’s lyrics suggests both kinds of nothing. The lines correspond exactly to Marie’s and her lover’s situation. The couple in the song, and Marie and her lover, recall love from a place of geographical (and metaphorically, existential) exile. Since the lines are in German they exemplify the possibility of returning to an original source and homeland. Yet first the words must be translated, and second they spatially interrupt Marie’s and the other lover’s recollection. Albeit metaphorically, un-translated

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6 Michael North argues that Eliot and other modernist poets incorporate foreign languages in part to defamiliarize the English language. Goethe, himself a proponent of German aestheticism, describes a similar insight: “In translating, we must go to the bring of the Untranslatable; it is only then that we really become aware of the foreignness of the nation and the language” (qtd. Prickett iix).
German lines simultaneously suggests nostalgia for the possibility of immediacy, and displacement leading to fragmentation.\textsuperscript{7}

Michael Edwards offers an additional insight into \textit{TWL}'s incorporation of German, French and other languages: “In [words’] utter foreignness, at once alienating and compelling, lies their significance. Salvation implies another language” (Edwards 113). Eventually, the ultimate salvation (“DA”) does indeed come in “another language.” Speakers’ voices in \textit{TWL} are so fragmented that perhaps only an entirely other language could provide unity. George Steiner notices a similar tendency in the poetry of Elizabeth Borcher, a contemporary of Eliot: “Because their language had served at Belsen...a number of German writers who had gone into exile or survived Nazism, despaired of their instrument...Elizabeth Borcher said: ‘I break open stars and find nothing, and again nothing, and then a word in a foreign tongue’” (\textit{Extraterritorial} 51). \textit{TWL} responds to its recognition of exile and fragmentation by seeking an external and stable language. It breaks open first one nothing then another, and finally turns to “a word in a foreign tongue.” \textit{TWL} therefore exhibits an impetus towards idealism. Since current languages and voices do not suffice it turns elsewhere for salvation.

Although Eliot drew on St. John of the Cross’s “negative theology,” the logic (if so it can be called) of negative theology was not uncommon among other modernists. A contemporary who shared this vision was the social and literary critic Georg Lukács. In \textit{Theory of the Novel} Lukács provides a vocabulary for the possibility of a text recovering or creating unity from its fragmentation. Lukács constitutes a particularly helpful

\textsuperscript{7} Harriet Davidson casts the ambivalence in psychological vocabulary: “Immediate experience is foundational for knowledge but insofar as this foundation can be said to exist, it is known, and thus is no longer immediate” (Davidson 62).
dialogue partner since he integrates theological, literary and social spheres. Like Eliot, Lukács (1885-1971) reacted against the emerging capitalism of contemporary Europe, recognizing its threat to social coherence. In his article *Eliot, Lukács, and the Politics of Modernism*, Michael North argues that “[t]he ideological core of romantic anticapitalism is its defense of culture as a principle of social unity against the economic and political fragmentation of modern civilization” (*Eliot, Lukács* 173). Since Eliot and Lukács shared a strong “anti-capitalist” impetus and a desire for “social unity” it is appropriate to read *TWL* in light of Lukács’ theoretical framework.

In *Theory of the Modern Novel* Lukács describes the epic genre. Homer, who perfects the genre, exemplifies the “absolute immanence of life” possible since “[f]or the epic, the world at the given moment is an ultimate principle” (Lukács 35, 46). In comparison, the novel stems from a growing distance between the divine and human realm and a corresponding abyss within men and women. For Lukács, the “revolt of the many” causes this abyss to gape wider and wider. The modern novel develops from its sense of distance from God: “the modern novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God” (88). Lukács coins the phrase “transcendent homelessness” to express modernity’s, and specifically German Romanticism’s, sense of exile from, and nostalgia for, immediacy between divine and human realm (41). The modern novel employs irony strategically in order to posit presence in the midst of absence: “Irony,

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8 Michael North writes about Lukacs and Eliot: “In fact, this reactionary modernist and this conservative revolutionary shared, for at least a few years, a single position that was both modernist and antimodern, revolutionary and conservative” (*Modernist* 170). An important point of similarity, says North, lies in each thinkers’ orientation to the modern problem of the one and the many: “For both conservative and socialist proponents of romantic anticapitalism see humankind in collective terms rather than as individuals, both stress historical values over ahistorical principles, and both decry the effects of the capitalist economy” (174).

9 In the epic genre, “a long road lies before him, but within him there is no abyss” (Lukacs 33).
with intuitive double vision, can see where God is to be found in a world abandoned by God; irony sees the lost, utopian home of the idea that has become an ideal, and yet at the same time it understands that the ideal is subjectively and psychologically conditioned” (92). The modern novel’s strategy for recovering unity therefore practically resembles medieval mystics’ negative theology:

The writer’s irony is a negative mysticism to be found in times without a god. It is an attitude of docta ignorantia towards meaning...and in it there is the deep certainty, expressible only by form-giving, that through not-desiring-to-know and not-being-able-to-know he has truly encountered, glimpsed and grasped the ultimate, true substance, the present, non-existent God. This is why irony is the objectivity of the novel. (90)

Lukács recognizes De Man’s “presence of nothingness” but rather than interpreting it as a “void” of non-reference he reads in it a trace of “real presences.”

Lukács’ concept of “negative mysticism” provides a framework in which to read TWL I’s positive search for a “utopian home” of meaning. TWL’s many poetic figures of absence – exile from homeland and mother tongue, parataxis, and via negativa syntax – inversely point to the possibility of a divine presence. Both Lukács and Eliot realize that fragmentation can by inverse logic imply nostalgia for a unifying source, and even intuit its “real presence.”

With Lukács’ framework we can read TWL’s fragments as one of its strategies for re-establishing unity by inverse logic. TWL employs juxtaposition, via negativa syntax and parataxis in place of logical, linear and temporal progression. In the first section alone, the reader progresses from a narrator’s voice, to Marie’s, Marie’s recollection of
her lover’s words, a prophetic voice from Ezekiel, lines from Wagner’s opera, then (arguably) Marie’s voice quoted by her lover, her lover’s voice and finally another line from Wagner. The stanza moves directly into Madame Sosostris’ monologue, back to the narrator’s voice and on to Stetson’s friend. The sheer amount of voices breaks narrative unity or progression.

The remainder of the poem proceeds in like manner, although as it proceeds it returns to previous images, words and phrases. The poem builds up internal resonances, then, without placing them within a linear narrative structure. Perhaps the clearest example of such resonances is Madame Sosostris’ pack of Tarot cards. Despite the poem’s critical tone when describing Madame Sosostris (the “famous clairvoyante” who “had a bad cold”) the cards she describes correspond to events, personae or circumstances in TWL. The line “(Those are pearls that were his eyes...)” is spoken, or thought, by the veteran in I and man in II; the “drowned Phoenician Sailor” returns in IV; and the other correspondences are “explained” by Eliot in a note:

I am not familiar with the exact constitution of the Tarot pack of cards, from which I have obviously departed to suit my own convenience. The Hanged Man, a member of the traditional pack, fits my purpose in two ways: because he is associated in my mind with the Hanged God of Frazer, and because I associate him with the hooded figure in the passage of the disciples to Emmaus in Part V. The Phoenician Sailor and the Merchant appear later; also the 'crowds of people', and Death by Water is executed in Part IV. The Man with Three Staves (an authentic member of the Tarot pack) I associate, quite arbitrarily, with the Fisher King himself.
Despite its apparent lack of coherent progression and unity between the fragments, then, images and personae reappear throughout *TWL*. The implication is that readers create unity as they experience the resonances within the text, and as they attempt to find their own means of progress through an apparently haphazard poem. We can say of *TWL* what Lukács does of the modern novel: “The subject's form - giving, structuring, delimiting act, his sovereign dominance over the created object, is the lyricism of these epic forms which are without totality. Such lyricism is here the last epic unity” (Lukács 51).  

*TWL*’s multiple monologues can be read as a collection of lyric fragments. The reader is finally the one who “shores” these fragments against her own ruin.

As mentioned above, many critics have attempted to find unity in *TWL* in the presence of its fragments. Cleanth Brooks (1906-1994) returns to Romantic writers to discover this strategy. Romantic writers “reveal gaps in logic that the reader is forced to cross with a leap of the imagination; they hint at analogies...which can be completed only by the reader” (Brooks xvii). The technique values spontaneous and organic “personality” over the classicist’s externally imposed “character.” Brooks reads *TWL* as exemplifying this Romantic technique. However, Brooks does not sufficiently account for the threat of solipsism. More recently Harriet Davidson makes a similar observation: “Thematically and formally the poem is packed with absences. The grammar is paratactic. Gaps

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10 C.f. “Art, the visionary reality of the world made to our measure, has thus become independent: it is no longer a copy, for all the models have gone; it is a created totality, for the natural unity of the metaphysical spheres has been destroyed forever” (Lukács 37).

11 Herbert Read defines character as the “‘enduring disposition to inhibit instinctive impulses in accordance with a regulative principle’” (Read 23).

12 C.f. “*The Waste Land*, for instance, there is the bored neurasthenic woman sitting in the sock room talking to the man beside her; and then, without warning, this scene is sharply juxtaposed with one of completely different complexion...No more than Wordsworth has Eliot spelled our the relationship of one scene to the other, or the purpose served by the contrast. He has thrown this burden on the reader demanding that he relate the two scenes in his imagination” (Brooks xvii).
abound” (Davidson 2). The gaps function strategically to prompt readers to create an a-temporal whole of the text: “Thus in the poem, people, objects, feelings, images, symbols, myth, literature, all are ontologically equal as the horizon of the poem...Logic and causality are necessarily rejected in the temporal deferral of wholeness and presence” (52). Immediacy is recovered by placing the subjective consciousness (i.e. the reader) in the place of the transcendent presence.

While these critics agree that TWL elevates the reader to the position of a unifying principle they ignore the possibility that such a strategy returns to solipsism on a larger scale. The reader now becomes the one source of authority that imposes her own unity on a fragmented landscape, while at the same time experiencing isolation from other readers. Even Lukács cannot avoid the pitfall:

For [Balzac] the subjective-psychological demonism which is characteristic of his work is an ultimate reality, the principle of all essential action which objectifies itself in heroic deeds...By this paradoxical homogeneity of the material of these novels, which in turn results from the extreme heterogeneity of its constituent elements, an immanence of meaning is rescued. (Lukács 108)

Lukács believes “immanence of meaning” to still be possible through collapsing objectivity (and an external standard) into the subjective consciousness. The reader “rescues...immanence of meaning” but only by valorizing or reifying her own subjectivity. Once again, Gunton’s thesis proves true. The reader becomes the new standard by which meaning is constructed. The “revolt against the one [author]” leads to the institution of “the one” (reader).13 Perhaps most disturbingly, such a strategy implies

13 In Is there a Meaning in this Text Kevin Vanhoozer furthers Gunton’s insight. Locating unifying power in readers essentially returns them to the authority of the author: “The text in the
a monological approach to texts. Bakhtin articulates the danger of such a style when reading Tolstoy’s story:

But all three personages, with their self-enclosed worlds, are united, juxtaposed and made meaningful to one another in the author’s unified field of vision and consciousness that encompasses them...the author, who is located outside them and takes advantage of his external position to give them a definitive meaning, to finalize them....Thus the total finalizing meaning of the life and death of each character is revealed only in the author’s field of vision...This is the finalizing, monological function of the author’s ‘surplus’ field of vision. (Dostoevsky 70)

If TWL attempts to set up the reader as the source of unity for TWL, then it risks imposing the “reader’s unified field of vision” onto the poem’s personae and various fragments. In Chapter One I argued that the poem’s voices were united only by the “author’s field of vision,” and therefore despite the apparent polyphony each voice signified the same essential reality (isolation). Critics run a similar risk by placing the reader in the center of the poem’s meaning – making endeavor.

Salvation

In TWL, voices speak but rarely dialogue, even when they experience the presence in the absence of presence. However, the poem eventually moves towards an even more defined external presence. TWL culminates with the revelation of a divine voice. Southam quotes Eliot’s letter to Bertrand Russell (1923): “‘Part V, which in my opinion is not only the bet part, but the only part that justifies the whole, at all’” (qtd. Southam 135). It remains to examine how Eliot “justifies the whole” rather than handing the poem over to age of the reader resembles a ventriloquist’s dummy: it serves as an opportunity for projecting one’s own voice” (Vanhoozer 164). Vanhoozer recognizes that the modern “death of the author” (and of God) leads to a subtle institution of the reader’s authority (161-162).
its fragmentation.

“What the Thunder Said” employs poetic devices previously seen in TWL I in order to gesture towards the possibility of recovering a center upon which personae in TWL might ground themselves. The section is set in the mountains and jungle, alternative geographies to the “Unreal city” in which personae suffer urban alienation: “Here is no water but only rock/ Rock and no water and the sandy road...Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit...the grass is singing/ Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel...a damp gust/ Bringing rain.”14 The passage generally moves from images of sterile and impotent nature to generative images.

If there is a narrative motion within TWL V it is of the dying or dead god returning and bringing water back to the parched Waste Land. The passage develops in parallel to the Biblical narrative of the Passion. The “frosty silence in the gardens/ After the agony in stony places” recall Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane; “He who was living is now dead,/ We who were living are now dying/ With a little patience,” recalls his crucifixion and the death of hope for believers (“patience” alluding to “the passion”); the “thunder of spring” to the earthquake following his crucifixion. The speaker then bemoans the absence of water and the presence only of rocks (“If there were only water amongst the rock”), where drought is the literal problem in the Waste Land.15 The persona finally wonders about the possibility of resurrection: “Who is the third who walks always beside you?/ When I count, there are only you and I together.” The line

14 For all we know, these jungled mountains might be the very mountains about which Marie said, “There you feel free.” The symmetry of placing mountains in the first and last sections, when both sections evince a negative mystical poetic, creates another resonance within an apparently fragmentary poem.
15 Both are Biblical images. Water alludes to Christ and the rock to the Church. In the Gospel of John Jesus says: “Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst” (John 4:14).
recalls the disciples’ encounter with the resurrected Jesus on the road to Emmaus.

This dying god constitutes a fitting image for the poem’s climax. Steiner’s “break in the covenant between word and world,” and Gunton’s “revolt of the many against the one,” are prompted by, and reinforce, the “death of God.” Therefore TWL expresses a crucial aspect of modernity’s general crisis when ending with this imagery. George Steiner argues that modernity lives within “Holy Saturday,” the time after the death of the god and before hoped-for resurrection:

But ours is the long day's journey of the Saturday. Between suffering, aloneness, unutterable waste on the one hand and the dream of liberation, of rebirth on the other...The apprehensions and figurations in the play of metaphysical imagining, in the poem and the music, which tell of pain and of hope, of the flesh which is said to taste of ash and of the spirit which is said to have the savour of fire, are always Sabbatarian. They have risen out of an immensity of waiting which is that of man. Without them, how could we be patient? (Presences 323).

Although it gestures beyond, TWL lives in the “long day’s journey of the Saturday.” Readers, and personae, must suffer with the dying God: “He who was living is now dead/ We who were living are now dying/ With a little patience.” If a “semantic center” becomes unstuck then human speakers cannot with their own effort re-establish it. But TWL does indeed gesture beyond Saturday, though with questionable success.

TWL V’s, and other sections’, attempted immediacy points beyond Saturday. The section rarely incorporates quotation marks, thereby (metaphorically) eliminating the distance between the personae and the narrator, or even the reader. Until the final section, each stanza might be spoken in the same voice. The first section excludes multiple
languages, lines from various sources, or clearly distinct voices to the same degree as preceding sections. In the final exchange between the Thunder and the speaker the line between immanence and transcendence is all but erased as readers move seamlessly from one to the other speaker: “Then spoke the thunder, / DA/ Datta: what have we given?/ My friend.” The unmarked transitions from one voice to the other resemble the “transparency” that Hugh Kenner ascribes to FQ: “[T]he now wholly effaced Invisible Poet, who composed the score, but is only figuratively present in the performance” (Kenner 306). By “effacing” the voice of a distinct persona, TWL V gestures towards transparency or immediacy in which speech is apparently un-mediated.

This style differs from the highly self-conscious voices and poetic arrangements in “A Game of Chess.” TWL II, replete with its quotation marks and irregular spacing, consistently reminded readers of its own artificiality. This is the paradigmatic work of demystification, according to De Man: “The self-reflecting mirror-effect by means of which a work of fiction asserts, by its very existence, its separation from empirical reality, its divergence, as a sign, from a meaning that depends for its existence on the constitutive activity of this sign, characterizes the work of literature in its essence” (Blindness 17). TWL II reminds the reader of its own “artificiality,” and the “artificiality” of all “coincidence” between sign and signified, subjective consciousness and perceived object. In TWL V, however, the seamless progression from one voice to the other foregoes the work of constant demystification. While TWL recognizes the “void” of non-reference and artificiality of all signs on the one hand, it finally points beyond these.

In addition to formally embodying a kind of immediacy, TWL V is the only other section besides TWL I to incorporate via negativa syntax:
Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit
Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit
There is not even silence in the mountains
But dry sterile thunder without rain
There is not even solitude in the mountains
But red sullen faces sneer and snarl

The lines prevent attempts to categorize apophaticism and absence themselves: “There is not even silence...There is not even solitude.” TWL employs via negativa syntax in order to positively approach a presence that appears to have departed from the “Unreal City.” In this final section, then, the poem approaches a divine voice using appropriate techniques.

These fragments finally lead to the thunder’s speech: “Then spoke the thunder/DA.” Southam points to the original source: “Eliot refers us to the source of the Indian legend of the Thunder in the sacred book Brihadaranyaka – Upanishad v, 2. Three groups – gods, demons, men – approach the creator Parajapti and each in turn asks him to speak. To each group he answers ‘DA.’ Each group interprets this reply differently” (Southam 141). “DA” is both a syllable and a voice. Voice (a person’s presence and communication of their presence) is precisely what has been lost in modernism’s “language revolution,” and in the Waste Land. Michael Edwards explains the repercussions of doubting logos in terms of voice:

[S]elf-consciousness, or the presence of the self to the self, and of the world, or the presence of 'the infinite signified,' of a vast intelligibility secure beyond word and thought. For Derrida, the notion of presence is no longer tenable. In 'metaphysics'
it is the voice - speaking, hearing oneself speak - that gives access to presence, to being, to meaning, as it also produces the idea of world and of world-origin.

(Edwards 220)

Yet “voice” is precisely the salvation TWL posits for its fragmented and slipping personae and readers. “DA” “shores up” TWL’s fragments “against [its] ruin” specifically by pointing to the possibility of voice, and a divine voice in particular.

TWL’s “DA” can be read in the context of the Upanishads. The Vedic holy text reveals the Absolute Reality, Brahman, and means of approaching this reality. Brahman is the name for the impersonal entity who is “changeless reality” (Upanishads 59). Given his nature, “The eyes do not see him, speech cannot utter him, the senses cannot reach him....The subtle Self within the living and breathing body is realized in that pure consciousness wherein is no duality“ (61). The philosophy borders on monism since it claims that the particularity of the material world and the sensuous order is illusory. Only one essential reality exists. To escape the “abyss of ignorance,” the Upanishads council followers to meditate on the sacred sound “OM” (61). OM is “the highest symbol. He who knows it is reverenced as a knower of Brahman,” and “transcends the senses” by meditating on it (27, 59). The method of meditating finally leads to salvation, escape from the sensuous world and becoming one with Brahman: “He who knows Brahman becomes Brahman” (69). When “DA” is read in light of the Upanishads’ “OM” then we see once more that TWL responds to its fragmentation through re-asserting the ultimate “one” of merged consciousnesses.

The Thunder does not simply speak but potentially initiates a form of dialogue. Southam notes this dialogue without analyzing its significance: “Three groups – gods,
demons, men – approach the creator Parajapti and each in turn asks him to speak. To each group he answers ‘DA.’ Each group interprets this reply differently” (Southam 141). In his notes, Eliot glosses “Datta...Dayadhvam...Damyata” as “Give. Sympathize. Control.” Entry of a divine voice enables a form of dialogue, albeit a brief dialogue. Yet the speakers in each case admit their failure to put into action the attitudes commanded. The first speaker wonders aloud, “Datta: what have we given?” The second speaker admits he and others have failed in sympathy because they have been trapped in their own isolation: “Dayadhvam: I have heard the key/ Turn in the door once and turn once only/ We think of the key, each in his prison/ thinking of the key.” The final speaker answers in the conditional grammatical mode, implying that the condition for enabling control has not been met: “Damyata: The boat responded/ Gaily...your heart would have responded/ Gaily, when invited.” The voice of the Thunder holds out the promise of peace by establishing these attitudes and actions among the human community (“Shantih”).

Each group responds in the first person plural, a form rarely found in TWL and then only to express shared disaster (as was the case in TWL II): “what have we given...We think of the key,” and then the second person singular, “your heart.” The exchange suggests that the divine voice ought to provide salvation for the inhabitants of TWL in the form of establishing community and the possibility of communication. However, speakers do not dialogue with each, but rather express their communal failure at adopting the required attitudes. On the one hand, then, the poem gestures towards salvation enabled by the recovery of a divine voice (and presence) and the grounds it provides for enabling dialogue (that suffice in The Upanishads). On the other hand, the speakers each come away from “DA” hearing a different word. The exchange in The
Upanishads is successful: the human community has learned what it needed to from encountering the divine voice. In *TWL*, however, the voices that hear the one divine sound are not thereby enabled to communicate with each other. Arguably, and perhaps metaphorically, the divine sound perpetrates the problem of solipsism as every individual leaves having heard a different commandment. Even a divine voice breaking into the Waste Land cannot necessarily enable communication or establish a dialogical community among its personae. One must finally ask with Edwards, “Is the end of *The Waste Land* joyful or madly sinister?” (Edwards 113).

After the recovery of a “semantic center” and of the possibility of voice, the stanzas degenerate into fragments. The final stanza provides in microcosm the event of Babel that has haunted *TWL* from the beginning:

Murmur of maternal lamentation
Who are those hooded hordes swarming
Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth
Ringed by the flat horizon only
What is the city over the mountains
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London

Unreal
The hell of isolation and instability in *TWL* II has broken loose throughout all the world’s cities. Southam recognizes the nursery rhyme, “London bridge is falling down,” in the
line “Falling towers” (Southam 143). The line may also allude to Babel itself, and the following lines formally enact the fall when the names degenerate into “Unreal.” The section degenerates as a whole into a formal re-enactment of the loss of a unifying center. The fragments include a reference to the mythological Fisher King (“I sat upon the shore...”); a child’s nursery rhyme (“London Bridge is calling down”); an un-translated line from Dante’s Inferno, in which Dante meets a soul “now suffering the punishment of the lustful” (144); a line from a Latin poem in which the “poet laments that his song is unheard and asks when the spring will return to give it voice” (144); a line from Tennyson’s Prince’s song, in which the speaker “appeals to the bird to be the messenger of his love” (144); a French line from Gérard de Nerval’s sonnets, in which the poet “speaks of himself as the disinherited prince” (144); and finally a reference to the mythic mountain Hieronymo, and simultaneously to a character from Thomas Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy who is “driven mad by the murder of his son” (145). In each line the speaker or character suffers in isolation from some aspect of a broken relationship. The many voices cannot communicate, yet this very experience becomes one underlying reality.

Southam glosses the poem’s last lines eloquently: “This is the final stage of the Grail quest. The Knight is tested by the illusion of nothingness” (136). The stanzas embody in microcosm the whole of the poem. The lines are global in scope but are only connected through parataxis. When read as a whole the stanza takes on an epic quality, since it points to the same essential reality and fate underlying every city in Western civilization. At the same time, the lines are mutually isolated. The poem either points back to the fragments to demonstrate how they have been “shorn against my ruin,” or the
voice of the Thunder perpetrates severe fragmentation because just as it posits transcendence it admits ultimate unfinalizability.

The poem continues this ambiguity to the end:

I sat upon the shore

Fishing, with the arid plains behind me

Shall I at least set my lands in order?

The Fisher King asks for “order” but leaves his question hanging. The fragments pile up, and the poem ends: “These fragments I have shored against my ruins...Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata./ Shantih shantih shantih.” The fragments quiver between the divine voice and the repetition of “peace.” Southam explains that Shantih “serves as the formal ending to the Upanishads, the poetic dialogues and commentary which follow the Vedas...In Hindu tradition, ‘shantih’ is a mantra (a word of great religious and psychological power), a closing prayer, and a Sanskrit term for the goal of meditative truth” (145). Peace (shantih) comes in the form of a dialogue, even in the form of prayer (as dialogue with the divine). Yet when repeated as a mantra it loses this possibility for dialogue, especially dialogue among the human community. The ensuing unity and communion takes the form of monistic submersion of all individuals within the impersonal Peace of Brahman.

The multiple voices in the last stanza are held together between “DA” and “Shantih shantih shantih.” The personae never achieve dialogue with each other, or even continued dialogue with the divine voice. The communicative pattern (perhaps metaphorically) illustrates the relational impotence that continues through the end of TWL. What Bakhtin says of Tolstoy can again be said of this final stanza: “all three
personages, with their self-enclosed worlds, are united, juxtaposed and made meaningful to one another in the author’s unified field of vision and consciousness that encompasses them” (Dostoevsky 69). We can read the “author” either as the reader (attempting to find order in the fragments), or the divine voice itself who encompasses all individual voices by merging them into its impersonal mantra, “Shantih shantih shantih.” Salvation for Babel requires one voice, syllable or mantra. But the achieved unity is ambivalent at best.

Stèphane Mallarmé, a poet after whom Eliot intentionally patterned himself, betrays a similar ambivalence resulting from his attempt to deal with “linguistic pluralism”: “Languages are imperfect because multiple; the supreme language is missing...The diversity of languages on earth means that no one can utter words which would bear the miraculous stamp of Truth Herself Incarnate...we have no sufficient reason for equating ourselves with God” (Mallarmé 38). “Diversity of languages” proves supremely problematic in TWL. Rather than working from multiplicity to polyphony, and then to dialogue, TWL searches for “Truth Herself Incarnate” through presenting a transcendent voice. Mallarmé expresses the value of poetry given this reality in language strikingly reminiscent of TWL’s final stanza: “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” (43). Mallarmé’s perception of “nothing” prompts him to practically reify literature. Mallarmé’s move resembles De Man’s, since for De Man literature and fiction reveal to readers the essential “presence of nothingness.” The trend here (particularly common among Eliot’s contemporaries) is to slip from recognizing multiplicity and slippage to positing an underlying essence, and thereby by inverse law returning to monism, or essentialism. In his book Speech and Reality written between 1930s-1950s,
the linguistic Rosenstock-Huessy apparently similarly correlates a common language (or one language) with the possibility for peace. Writing shortly after World War II he claims:

War between two territories ends with peace. What does this mean? People who have not been on speaking terms, begin to speak again....It took ten years after World War II before the victor tried to speak. There was then no peace from 1945 to 1955....Something is wrong with the content of language. It seems mere verbiage, dead formula, a petrified ritual. The ‘anarchy’ means a lack of unanimity...Two languages are spoken under the hypocritical veneer of one.

Tower of Babel. (Speech14)

Huessy argues that a new language must be created in order to bring peace to society. Yet the signal difference is that the “one language” or “one word” towards which TWL gestures does not necessarily enable dialogue. In the end, TWL “fashions a single new word which is total in itself and foreign to the language – a kind of incantation.” In light of this irreducible ambivalence, Edwards’ final question is both legitimate and eerie: “Is the end of The Waste Land joyful or madly sinister?” (Edwards 113).

Conclusion

TWL proceeds along a tension between presence and absence, plenitude and vacancy. On the one hand, the poem recognizes the fragmentation that leads to monologue, solipsism and nihilism. It recognizes half of Gunton’s thesis: “the fragmentation of experience which is the outcome of modern displacement is alienating and heteronomous, not liberating” (Gunton 35). On the other hand, like Lukács and medieval mystics TWL recognizes in the persistent presence of “nothing” as the trace of
divine presence. Yet it is just when the poem gestures towards the presence implicit in absence that it perpetrates the very slippage and artificiality which it attempted to eschew. Between nothing and nothing, TWL’s conflicting poetic laps at the ear of the reader like the sound of a silent sea, “Oed’ und leer das Meer.” Readers are left to wander between being abysmally silenced and being “wordloosed over seven seas” (qtd. Edwards 222). George Steiner poses the rhetorical question with which TWL leaves its readers: “How silent must that sea have been; how ready for the wonder of the word” (Extra-Territorial 54).
A Poetics of Renunciation: 
the humility of Four Quartets

“In a dark time, the eye begins to see.” Theodore Roethke

TWL’s “voice-collage” formally embodies one of its central crises. The poem incorporates “many” voices but lacks “one” common language, word or context in which for them to communicate. In Chapter One I argue that the poem thematically and formally re-enacts Babel and stares into the void of non-referential. In Chapter Two I examine how TWL’s salvation depends upon a divine voice whose speech provides grounds for dialogue. The poem gestures towards salvation but only ambivalently realizes it. The poetic movement I have discerned in TWL (reacting to the abyss by re-establishing a source of unity) is frequently applied to FQ. Bradbury and McFarlane summarize a common critical trend: “Eliot is suspected of having given in to the temptation: falling back on old mythologies to avoid the terror of the abyss” (Modernism 330).¹ In light of FQ’s homogenous and stylized form following Eliot’s personal conversion to Christianity, several critics interpret FQ as the result of Eliot’s attempt to impose a unifying, if not totalizing, principle on reality. It is my contention that FQ sees the void of non-reference as clearly as does TWL, but responds by renouncing attempts to recover a divine voice or stabilize logos and logic. In Chapter Four I will argue that FQ places its hope in recovering not an immediate divine voice but dialogical mediation.

Critical Context

¹ Rebecca Beasley concurs: FQ evinces a “move away from the ideologically open texts of The Waste Land...to a more didactic form of poetry: rather than analyzing the contemporary situation, this poetry aims to provide answers” (Beasley 113).
Many critics base their interpretations on Eliot’s famous self-description following his conversion to Christianity in 1927: “The general point of view may be described as classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion” (Prose 19). Michael Edwards articulates the logically implicit question: “The language of a Christian poem should also be Christian. (As the language of a tragedy should, arguably, be tragic.) The subject is very complex, and has hardly begun to be examined; its implications seem to me awesome” (Edwards 114). Many critics interpret the “Christian language” of FQ as its homogeneity. The form apparently betrays Eliot’s new discovery of a principle of unity (Christianity, or more specifically the Christian tradition that united European culture for the past thousand years).

Pollard exemplifies a typical critical perspective in reading in FQ’s homogenous form its attempt to “purify the language of the tribe:” “this ambivalence leads Eliot to shift from revitalizing poetry by infusing it with common speech to purifying common speech through the refining power of poetry” (Pollard 101). Pollard speaks critically of FQ’s attempts to “purify” since purification implies imposing “one” standard on “many” individuals and cultures. He draws an unsavory analogy between the poem and the erudite Henry Higgins: “it is as if Eliot’s model for the poet is now Henry Higgins instead of Sir James Frazer, the magisterial phonetician refining the speech of Lil and her friends into an ideal language instead of the oral anthropologist recovering the immediacy of their primitive speech to renew poetry” (Pollard 102). For Pollard, FQ’s homogenous and “correct” diction reveal Eliot’s form of purification: “Eliot decides to purify the dialect of the tribe primarily to recover a sense of European cultural unity” (105). Martin Warner quotes yet another critical voice that offers a similar interpretation: “Anthony Julius
claims that *Four Quartets* is the most ‘cogent expression’ of Eliot’s ‘conservatism’ which he sees rooted in the invocation of ‘tradition’, objecting that ‘Eliot does not allow for conflict between traditions, either within an individual or a culture’” (Warner 124). In explaining that “much modern social and political thought can be understood as the revolt of the many against the one, and at the same time that of humanity against divinity,” Gunton implies that modern thinkers would typically interpret belief in divinity as a return to totalitarianism (Gunton 27).²

This critical reading is certainly not unfounded. In *Poetry and Drama* (1951) Eliot himself writes: “It is a function of all art to give us some perception of an order in life, by imposing an order upon it” (*Poetry* 93), and again, “[I]t is ultimately the function of art, in imposing a credible order upon ordinary reality, and thereby eliciting some perception of an order in reality” (94). While Eliot indisputably longs for unity throughout his poetic career, and discovers grounds for it after converting to Christianity, *FQ* embodies a strikingly different quality of unity than often interpreted. Before delineating the nature of its unity in Chapter Four, I argue in Chapter Three that *FQ* does not “retreat into old mythologies” in order to “avoid facing ‘the nothingness of human matters.’” Rather, it actively points to the “void” and renounces vacant attempts to avoid it.

*FQ* intentionally displaces immediacy, stability and coincidence of self with self, and signifier with signified.³ The poetry has internalized even more thoroughly than *TWL* the ambivalence between two kinds of “nothingness.” In the very essay in which he

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² Gunton argues that modern thinkers revolt against figures who impose totalizing structures or standards on others: “deity, whether theist or deist, is commonly seen to be at the root of totalitarian or repressive forms of social order” (Gunton 25).

³ In *Poetics of Fascism* Paul Morrison observes that when Eliot converts he shares with post-structuralism a renunciation of aesthetic totalization. He expects less of poetry because he expects more of religion (Morrison 10).
argues that art imposes an order on experience Eliot admits its limitations:

For it is ultimately the function of art, in imposing a credible order upon ordinary reality, and thereby eliciting some perception of an order in reality, to bring us to a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation; and then leave us, as Virgil left Dante, to proceed upward a region where that guide can avail us no further.

(Poetry 94)

Against Beasley’s contention that \( FQ \) “aims to provide answers,” the above passage can be read as revealing Eliot’s recognition of even a poet’s limitations (Beasley 113).

**Vacancy as attempted mastery**

\( FQ \) recognizes the problem of vacancy but offers a different diagnosis than \( TWL \). Critics who share Pollard’s reading typically read \( FQ \)’s homogenous and stylized form as Eliot’s attempt to impose standard and “correct” English on folk voices. Pollard argues of Walcott what he does of \( FQ \), saying: “Similar to Coleridge, Walcott [following \( FQ \)] sees communal and linguistic fragmentation as a more pressing concern, so he aspires to create an ideal poetic language that unites disparate people into a single culture” (Pollard 83). The poem imposes its “ideal poetic language” on speakers’ voices, both betraying and enacting a desire for a totalizing system of unity. Pollard reads \( FQ \) as I (and Michael Edwards) have read \( TWL \): “the most intimate loss that the poem is concerned with, [is] the loss of a single, just speech” (Edwards 107).

\( FQ \) recognizes the threat of linguistic slippage and solipsism following “the break in the covenant between word and world.” However, it relocates the real problem from loss of a “semantic center” to speakers’ attempts to center signs. Speakers in \( FQ \) fail to communicate when they are too overly confident about speech. The fifth section in each
quartet typically expresses linguistic failure (i.e. vacancy) and ensuing silence. The speaker in each case may be the eminent man of letters who surfaces throughout the poem, since he journeys from attempting to purify words to renouncing his mastery over them. *BN V* initiates the trend:

...Words strain

Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,

Under the tension, slip, side, perish,

Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,

Will not stay still. Shrieking voices

Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering,

Always assail them.

The language anticipates the logic (if it can so be called) and even vocabulary of post-structuralism. Words may be inherently unstable, and signified and signifier only temporarily and arbitrarily connected. Yet ultimately signs “break” because speakers place them under too great a “tension” and give them too heavy a “burden.” Speakers perpetrate violence on words when attempting to master them, not the other way around. Words are “assail[ed]” by “Shrieking voices/ Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering.” Each verb emphasizes speakers’ frantic and frenetic manipulation of words.

The speaker in *EC V* similarly renounces the temptation to believe in the plenitude of language and instead admits its limitations:

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4 Michael Edwards offers a working definition of the logocentrism against which Jacques Derrida (and Eliot) react. It is "self-consciousness, or the presence of the self to the self, and of the world, or the presence of 'the infinite signified,' of a vast intelligibility secure beyond word and thought. For Derrida, the notion of presence is no longer tenable. In 'metaphysics' it is the voice - speaking, hearing oneself speak that gives access to presence, to being, to meaning, as it also produces the idea of world and of world-origin" (Edwards 220).
So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years –

Twenty years largely wasted, the years of l’entre deux guerres –

Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt

Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure

Because one has only learnt to get the better of words

For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which

One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture

Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate

With shabby equipment always deteriorating.

Words are limited and unstable because temporal. FQ admits the futility of “purifying” language when purity means stasis, for language constantly changes. The diverse voices in FQ therefore speak under similar linguistic limitations as do those in TWL. The children in BN and LG “laugh” but never speak; the “captains, merchant bankers,” and other eminent men in EC go into the darkness, and the verse continues “into the silent funeral;” in DS “The sea howl/ And the sea yelp,” and the beach voices a “soundless wailing;” finally, in LG the “voice of the hidden waterfall” is only “half-heard.”

While FQ does not evince TWL’s linguistic diversity (i.e. idioms, dialects and foreign languages), its linguistic landscape is just as polyphonic. Although I explain it in greater length in my Introduction, Bakhtin describes polyphony as “A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” (Dostoevsky 6). FQ incorporates perhaps a greater array of “independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” than does TWL. BN begins with the voice of the bird (“Quick, said the bird,” and later, “Go, Go, go, said the bird”), and the laughter of children; EC with the voice of Eliot’s dead
ancestors (who alone speak in dialect in *FQ*), the erudite man of letters, and “The wave cry, the wind cry;” in *DS* “The sea has many voices...The sea howl/ And the sea yelp, are different voices,” and accompanying these is “the soundless wailing” of fishermen’s wives,” in addition to “a voice descanting (though not to the ear,/...and not in any language”); and *LG* introduces the voice of “a familiar compound ghost,” the voice of the dead, “the voice of this Calling,” and “The voice of the hidden waterfall/ And the children in the apple-tree.” *FQ* incorporates voices from the dead, from all socio-economic backgrounds (the erudite scholar and the fishermen’s wives), from different geographical locations (the fishermen off the coast of Massachusetts as well as the English), from different generations and demographics, and from animals and nature.  

**Renouncing competing “modes of wisdom”**

*FQ* recognizes the problem of linguistic slippage, and of its epistemological corollary. In addition to resisting a single “semantic center,” *FQ* resists prioritizing typically authoritative epistemologies. In his article, *Four Quartets: music, word, meaning and value*, D. S. Moody argues that a primary characteristic of the *Quartets* is its constant tension between various modes of wisdom: “The challenge which the poetry sets itself – and it is a profound challenge – is to rise to each fresh call made upon its resources by the determination to proceed from one degree of wisdom to the next” (Moody 145). The poetry employs multiple “instruments” towards this end, such as diverse modes of signification, poetic figures and voices. Moody discerns three primary “instruments:”

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5 What Eliot wrote about poetic technique in *Murder in the Cathedral* might be applied to *FQ*. In *Poetry and Drama* he explains that he decided to write neither in the “original” nor the “modern” idiom: “The style therefore had to be neutral, committed neither to the present nor the past” (*Poetry* 85). We can read *FQ* as evincing a similar “neutral” style. By neutralizing the accents of diverse voices (and excluding idioms, dialects and so on) Eliot neutralizes admits the impossibility of linguistic mastery, regardless of economic or social standing.
“impersonal wisdom,” “dry paradoxes of the negative way to God” and natural experience (145, 146, 148). Hugh Kenner also recognizes diverse voices in \textit{FQ}, arguing that \textit{TWL}’s voice is eloquent in comparison to \textit{FQ}’s:

The \textit{Quartets} muse, they traverse and exploit a diversity of timbres and intonations, interchange themes, set going a repetitive but developing Minuet of motifs. \textit{The Waste Land} is by comparison a piece of eloquence. Like the voices of a string quartet, the lyric, didactic, colloquial, and deliberative modes of the poems pursue in an enclosed world the forms of intent \textit{conversation}. (Kenner 305)

On this reading the absence of geographic and economic dialect in \textit{FQ} enables the verse to embody the (perhaps) more profound idioms of various modes of wisdom. The modes are cast in distinct voices. By recognizing \textit{FQ}’s multiple modes of signification, Moody and Kenner attempt to account for its “severalness and singularity” (Moody 142). If Moody and Kenner are correct, then we can read \textit{FQ} as even more polyphonic than \textit{TWL}. Bakhtin writes of the modern polyphonic novel that it “begins to make use of these languages, manners, genres; it forces all exhausted and used-up, all socially and ideologically alien and distant worlds to speak about themselves in their own language and in their own style” (\textbf{Dialogical} 409). Different forms of knowledge are given different voices in \textit{FQ}.

We can develop Moody’s and Kenner’s observations by contributing a third mode of wisdom that Eliot resists – the autonomous text – and by reading the resistance to all three as both inheriting medieval mysticism and anticipating post-structuralism. Rather than resorting to a naive totalizing principle of unity that purports immediacy, \textit{FQ}
thematically and formally resists three significant forms of epistemological certainty: judgment, or abstract thought; experience, or sensation; and Literature, or the autonomous text. FQ thereby develops a poetics of renunciation that formally enacts its subject matter and responds to “Years of living among the breakage / Of what was believed in as the most reliable- / And therefore the fittest for renunciation” (DS II). While I examine what FQ’s poetics positively constructs in Chapter Four I limit my analysis in the present chapter to what the poetics resists.

1. Renunciation of judgment

Moody begins his analysis by demonstrating how FQ consistently resists “the voice of impersonal thought, seeking a universal truth through abstraction, logical argument, and the resolution of paradox,” or “impersonal wisdom” (Moody 144, 145). The resistance is typical among post-structuralist thinkers. In Allegories of Reading De Man argues that “[t]he ability of the mind to set up, by means of judgment, formally coherent structures is never denied, but the ontological or epistemological authority of the resulting systems, like that of texts, escapes determination” (Allegories 237). De Man applies his insight concerning the artificiality of texts and the ambiguity of signs to the nature of thought itself, thereby drawing an “equation of judgment with language” (233), logos and logic. All perceived correspondences actually result from thinkers’ imposition of artificial structures on human experience, until finally “the act of thought is itself, by its very manifestation, a falsification” (232). De Man provides a helpful vocabulary for approaching FQ’s renunciation of judgment, in addition to demonstrating how the poem

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6 Douglas Atkins also recognizes competing perspectives in FQ, including “literature and philosophy...experience and reflection” (Atkins 91).
anticipates post-structuralism.\textsuperscript{7} \textit{TWL} despaired over this realization, prompted by the “language revolution” and death of God. \textit{FQ} not only anticipates post-structuralism, but in some ways moves beyond De Man’s insight (and blindness). \textit{FQ} resists overconfident positivism and logocentrism by employing three modes of signification: deconstruction of binaries, paradox and \textit{via negativa} sentence structure. With the aid of Moody, Kenner and De Man I will examine how \textit{FQ} thematically and formally renounces “judgment.”

a. deconstruction of binaries

Although many critics emphasize \textit{FQ}’s deliberate structure and organization the poetry consistently points to logical binaries only to deconstruct them. The role of the four elements provides a representative example. Each quartet is structured around the four elements: \textit{BN} is associated with air, \textit{EC} with earth, \textit{DS} with water and \textit{LG} with fire. The careful structure evokes a “totalizing” sensibility within the poem, one of many poetic features that might be interpreted as Eliot’s imposition of unity on sense experience. As each quartet unfolds the images of the particular elements accumulate, creating internal resonances. \textit{EC} I starts with “ashes to the earth,” then proceeds to man and woman “Lifting heavy feet in clumsy shoes,/ Earth feet, loam feet, lifted in country mirth/ Mirth of those long since under earth.” On one reading, then, the structure constitutes one poetic strategy for attaining plenitude of signification within the poetry. However, the final quartet undoes the structure by creating binaries between the elements and proceeding to deconstruct them. \textit{LG} II moves from death of “hope and despair,” to “Dead water and dead sand,” and finally death of “water and fire.” The stanza embodies

\textsuperscript{7} De Man is helpful to incorporate as a dialogue partner because he articulates well a common view among those who reject Western metaphysics and the Enlightenment project (replete with positivism and logocentrism).
not only the “death” of each element but more interestingly of the perceived relation between each. The poetry resists an apparently monological and static structure, and by implication what De Man describes as the “irresistible tendency to see seductive similarities where they do not exist” (Allegories 239). FQ reveals the artificiality of binaries in order to resist overly confident logocentrism.

b. paradox

Secondly, FQ formally embodies its skepticism towards linear reasoning and abstract thought characteristic of (overconfident) logocentrism through the use of paradox. As seen in TWL apophatic writers commonly employ this literary technique. Paradox effectively challenges the logical relationship between terms. While deconstruction of binaries stems from, and leads to, the nothingness of non-reference, paradox intuits the nothingness of an ineffable presence. Like TWL, then, FQ recognizes both qualities of nothing. It does not necessarily deconstruct a rational thought by employing paradox, but rather by giving voice to many modes of wisdom without authorizing any one. The stanzas in which paradox is employed most liberally are those that intuit a presence within apparent absence. TWL I and V parallel BN I and LG I in this, and other, ways.

BN I employs paradox throughout, starting with, “footfalls echo in the memory/ Down the passage which we did not take/ Towards the door we never opened,” and proceeding to “the unheard music.” The lines refuse to impose an analytical structure or conceptual pattern on experience. Likewise, the “unheard music” suggests a quality of experience but resists falsifying it by imposing on it a logical structure. The lines most demonstrative of the poetry’s resistance come later: “into the box circle...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...Then a cloud passed, and the pool was
empty.” The “box circle” is the mystical paradox employed by Dante in Paradiso when
attempting to approach the sacred. The next lines point to the mystical vision itself. The
dry pool becomes “filled with water out of sunlight.” As seen in Chapter Two, mystics
commonly express their experience of the divine using imagery of light. Eliot observes
that Dante’s means of “making the spiritual visible” depend upon “a mastery use of that
imagery of light which is the form of certain types of mystical experience” (Prose 229).
Likewise, LG I proceeds from paradox to paradox in order to point to a mystical
experience without falsifying it through logical structures: “In windless cold that is the
heart’s heat,/ Reflecting in a watery mirror/ A glare that is blindness in the early
afternoon.” The lines employ imagery of light to suggest an experience of the divine
presence, but do not resort to imposing conceptual schemes on the experience.

c. syntax embodying the “negative way”

Finally, FQ incorporates many more via negativa sentences than TWL. As seen in
Chapter Two via negativa syntax formally embodies mystics’ method of approaching the
ineffable divine. The third section of each quartet tends to express the vacancy that
results from over-reliance on artificial structures and logocentrism. The sections formally
challenge this “mode of wisdom” through via negativa syntax.

BN III describes the vapid faces of those “Distracted from distraction by
distraction/ Filled with fancies of meaning,” and the world as being moved “In
appetency, on its metalled ways.” The speaker implies that static concepts falsify
experience by imposing on them preset structures. The voice in III is impersonal and
prosaic, perhaps the voice of “impersonal thought” itself. The verse implies that its activity is futile and leads to “disaffection:” “the world moves/ In appetency, on its metalled ways.” The “stillness” around which *FQ* revolves is in part stillness of linear and logical thought and linguistic expression. Throughout, *BN* III resists vapid “twittering” by posing an alternative mode of signification: “neither daylight...Nor darkness...Neither plenitude nor vacancy. Only a flicker...Not here/ Not here the darkness, in this twittering world...not in movement,” and so on. The poetry implies a correlation between overuse of language (“this twittering world”) and the falsification perpetrated by abstract thought. The syntax deconstructs the binaries of day and night, and plenitude and vacancy themselves.

*EC* III similarly demonstrates the vacancy of workers’ attempts to stabilize success: “dark dark dark. They all go into the dark,/ the vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant, / The captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters,/ The generous patrons of art, the statesmen and the rulers,/ Distinguished civil servants, chairmen of many committees.” All the professions listed are considered important by urban culture. The critique becomes clearer later: “the conversation rises and slowly fades into silence/ And you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen/ Leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about.” “Conversation” (or “twittering”) masks the vacancy of overused speech. The passage incorporates *via negativa* syntax to formally embody resistance to such confidence: “into the silent funeral,/ Nobody’s funeral, for there is no one to bury.”

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8 Moody reminds us that in these situations “[i]t is not the writing which is inferior, but the order of understanding which it is just there representing” (Moody 147).
DS III describes “passengers...settled/ To fruit, periodicals and business letters...Their faces relax from grief into relief,/ To the sleepy rhythm of a hundred hours.” Yet other verses challenge the security of such routine: “You are not the same people who left...You shall not think ‘the past is finished,’/ Or ‘the future is behind us.’...You are not those who saw the harbour/Receding.” Although the syntax does not proceed by negation as tightly as other sentences it progresses by a similar motion. Finally, LG III challenges different logical modes of attachment, and continues by way of negation: “If I think...of people, not wholly commendable,/ Of no immediate kin or kindness...It is not to ring the bell backward/ Nor is it an incantation of a Rose./ We cannot revive old factions/ We cannot restore old policies.” In the latter case the poetry troubles the past/future binary. Indeed, multiple aspects of the poetry trouble linear temporality, recognizing in it an analogous motion to linear and abstract reasoning. Once more, the poetry formally resists static conceptual structures that impose a pre-existing order on experience.

Pollard, Bradbury and McFarlane, and Rebecca Beasley interpret FQ’s apparently homogenous form as its retreat into one totalizing sensibility. However, its deconstruction of binaries, use of paradox and via negativa syntax suggests that far from retracting into a naive and logocentric totalization FQ evinces even less certainty (put positively, greater humility) towards a “semantic center.” The “void” that threw TWL in a crisis is ever present in FQ, but the cause is re-imagined as speakers’ attempt to achieve plenitude. In perpetrating such deconstruction FQ distinguishes itself from TWL’s Babel but more interestingly from its salvation (“DA”). FQ resists establishing one language or

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9 Douglas Atkins argues that FQ’s multiplicity suggests a very different form of purity. Purity does not require homogenization but a bringing together of opposites that refuses to prioritize any one voice: “Four Quartets embodies humility” (Atkins 116)
thought structure and instead evinces a mode of knowledge closer to humility.\textsuperscript{10} It is a form that does not fit easily in De Man’s plenitude/vacancy tension. As we will see in Chapter Four humility rejects both terms in favor of a “real presence” that does not depend on speakers’ mastery.

2. Renunciation of experience

\textit{FQ} resists a naive return to “judgment” as a primary mode of wisdom. Yet the poem also resists the most obvious alternative: experience. In \textit{Allegories of Reading} De Man similarly discounts natural and sensuous experience as an epistemological authority: “The stability of the natural world is by itself devoid of meaning and cannot become a source of knowledge. Being is for us only ‘the word ‘to be’, and the copula has no transcendental referent by natural or divine right. This negative insight [is] achieved in the differentiation between judgment and sensation” (\textit{Allegories} 233). Moody recognizes “experience” as a competing mode of wisdom in \textit{FQ}: “[it] is also clear that the commitment of the poem is to proceed from beyond the wisdom of natural experience” (Moody 145). \textit{FQ} reveals its “negative insight” in problematizing “sensation” and judgment. After all: “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” (\textit{EC II}).

Eliot is not the only modernist attempting to situate himself along a spectrum either end of which is judgment and experience. His contemporary, Herbert Read, devotes his study on modern poetry to distinguishing between character and personality.

\textsuperscript{10} Edwards offers a helpful nuance: "To deconstruct logocentrism is to discover the fallacy not of Logos but of what our worldly metaphysics has made of it, by proceeding as if there were no Fall" (Edwards 221).
terms that align with judgment and experience. Read describes personality as the Romantic elevation of organic, sensuous experience, frequently leading to an immediate encounter with nature in which self coincides with self. On the other hand, “Character is in fact armour against experience” since it imposes an external conceptual order and form on what should be spontaneous and organic (Read 23).\(^{11}\) Rosenstock-Huessy struggles with the same dilemma from a linguist’s perspective: “grammar is the last of the old dogmas, but harmful because its rules come before our experience. Social science has risen to try to understand and close the gap between the rule and our ensuing experience” (Huessy 98).\(^{12}\) Huessy articulates not only the typically modernist division between logic (the linear order of “grammar”) and organic experience, but also a typical desire for harmony between both. Many critics read the older Eliot as evincing neo-classical tendencies. Indeed, he himself advocated “extinction of personality,” and reacted strongly against William Wordsworth’s “spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling” (Wordsworth 237). Yet \(FQ\) resists fully authorizing either of Read’s two terms (character and personality), or of De Man’s two poles of knowledge (judgment and experience).

Like judgment, experience speaks from a particular voice and idiom: “Memory and imagination speak in the language of natural experience, a language of sense-perception and feeling and thence of emotion” (Moody 148). The idiom saturates \(BN\) I and \(LG\) V. I develop Moody’s argument by reading experience as the mode of knowledge

\(^{11}\) Cleanth Brooks also articulates the dilemma: “if men could now find in their own subjective life something that corresponds to what Mr. Hall calls the ‘old objective life of shared experience,’ then they would have re-established a rapport with nature and restored the community of values, the loss of which wasted the land” (Brooks xxvii). The “waste land” refers, of course, to \(TWL\).

\(^{12}\) Gunton realizes that this is a distinctly modern problem: “the fragmentation of experience which is the outcome of modern displacement is alienating and heteronomous, not liberating” (Gunton 35).
formed by Lukács’ description of the epic genre. The epic, according to Lukács, posits immediacy between divinity and humanity, and therefore self-coincidence and coincidence with the cosmos. It is in this sense that we can read the idiom of immediate experience in FQ.

BN I and LG I recall TWL’s own first and last sections. All four sections unfold in natural, or semi-natural settings. TWL I is set in the “Hofgarten” with lilacs and hyacinths, imagery of “the dead land” surprised by “a shadows of rain,” and finally “sunlight” and “the heart of light, the silence;” TWL V is set in “mountains” and “jungle.” I argued in Chapter Two that TWL yearns for, if not attempts to retrieve, immediacy with nature and self in these first and last sections, thus betraying its Romantic nostalgia. BN I and LG I therefore approach the same linguistic problematic as TWL I and V but evince radically different orientations towards it. BN I is set in “the rose-garden” with “rose-leaves,” and imagery of “the dead leaves,/ In the autumn heat” finally leading to “the pool was filled with water out of sunlight...out of heart of light.” Whereas TWL V ends with Nature speaking a transcendent word (a “master signifier”) BN I consistently displaces coincidence with self and nature and any ensuing ability to standardize or categorize sensuous experience. The poetry admits its status as imagination (“Down the passage which we did not take/ Towards the door we never opened”), and at the same time paradoxically as memory (“Footfalls echo in the memory”). The passage points to an ineffable experience that transcends even human understanding. The implication is that self-coincidence is illusory, and any definable experience only artifice. The passage does not discount experience itself but rather any attempt to reify or legitimate it. Ultimately, “We had the experience but missed the meaning” (DS II). The descriptions of
nature are therefore evocative rather than denotative, and are impossible to visualize: “The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery,” “Dry the pool, dry concrete...And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,” and “the leaves were full of children.” Many descriptions are developed through the use of paradox; how can music be unheard, how can a dry pool be filled? The poetry resists employing denotative language to signify sensuous experience.

*LG* I employs similar formal devices. It, too, is set in “midwinter spring,” and draws on sensual and natural imagery throughout. The section is set entirely in the present tense and emphasizes the word “is” consistently, reinforcing a sense of immediacy. The speaker speaks in the “second voice,” the poet speaking to readers. The technique prompts Hugh Kenner to argue that *FQ* is apparently more “transparent” than *TWL*. Moreover, the passage hints at a profound, if ineffable, order through its internal resonances and echoes, created through alliteration, often on the letter “s:” “Sempiternal though sodden towards sundown,/ Suspended;” internal rhyme, as with the “i” sound in “is brightest, with frost and fire,/ The brief sun flames the ice;” and repeated juxtapositions, such as “with frost and fire,” “Between melting and freezing” and “neither budding nor fading.” Combined, these poetic techniques evoke immediacy and transparency, hinting towards an epic unity of subjective consciousness and objective setting and ensuing totalization of experience (in contradistinction to judgment and

13 *BN* I and *LG* I reveal symbolism’s influence on Eliot. Mallarmé, a leading poet in the symbolist movement, describes post-Wagnerian poetic as a fusion between mysticism and idealism: “The poet must establish a careful relationship between two images, from which a third element, clear and subtle, will be distilled and caught by our imagination...It is not *description* which can unveil...but rather evocation, *allusion, suggestion*...This is the ideal I would call Transposition” (Mallarmé 40). Symbolist poets were peculiarly interested in experience, rather than abstract thought, and therefore it is particularly fitting to consider these sections of *FQ* as revealing symbolist techniques and concerns.
abstract thought). These poetic technique lead several critics to claim that BN I and LG I evince a unified and totalizing experience reminiscent of Homer’s “absolute immanence of life” (Lukács 30).

Despite the poetry’s affirmation of some underlying unity, however, its mode of signification consistently de-centers epical immediacy. Paradoxes such as “Frost and fire,” “melting and freezing,” resist denotation of actual natural states. In both BN I and LG I the speaker employs common natural images in order to evoke ineffable experiences. Both sections address readers in the first person plural or second person singular. (Interestingly, the only instances of first person plural or second person singular outside of a dialogue in TWL are TWL I and V, the two sections that evince a negative mystical poetic, and two lines in II where the couple agree only on their mutual isolation.) Yet while the experience itself might be common the speaker points to it with allusive imagery that resists translation into denotative language. If an epic vision is being cast the thread employed is the lyric, the poetic mode of subjective consciousness (in Read’s terms, “personality”).

Despite the repetition of “is” in LG I nothing actually “is” precisely the way it is described: “This is the spring time/ But not in time’s covenant. Now the hedgerow/ Is blanched.” The “time” is like spring but not quite spring; the logical relationship is neither of equation nor metonymy, but closer to via negativa logic. Likewise the hedgerow “is” blanched, but the bloom is equivocal and refers both to snow and to flowers. The poetry resists the possibility of linguistically scripting, denoting and stabilizing experience as a means for attaining immediacy. The poetic technique in BN
and LG I recognizes that stabilization prompts vacancy, and therefore resists the temptation to search for plenitude through immediacy in nature and self-coincidence.

De Man identifies the lyric as one of the poetic forms whose rise betrays the crisis between blindness and insight in modernity. He quotes Paul Celan when making his argument: “The blindness here is not caused by an absence of natural light but by the absolute ambivalence of a language. It is a self-willed rather than a natural blindness...One of the ways in which lyrical poetry encounters this enigma is in the ambivalence of a language that is representational and nonrepresentational at the same time” (Blindness 185). LG I is shot-through with language of blindness and insight, with the “brief sun...Reflecting in a watery mirror/ A glare that is blindness in the early afternoon.”

The poetic ambivalence might better be interpreted as a dialect between blindness and insight that becomes the mode of signifying beyond the text. All the images hint towards a reality that cannot be directly denoted. Douglas Atkins’ critique of romanticism is instructive: “Romanticism goes wrong in short-circuiting indirectness and attempting to reach or attain strangeness directly without the necessary detour – mediation – of reality” (Atkins 9). FQ resists short-circuiting reality specifically because it understands that “human kind/ cannot bear very much reality.”

Finally, by resisting a hegemony of either judgment or experience the poetry suggests a mode of knowledge that incorporates and integrates both. De Man himself recognizes that the terms do not constitute binaries: “Judgment is described as the deconstruction of sensation...Sensation unadulterated by judgment is in fact inconceivable” (Allegories 230). Eliot articulates the tension in his dissertation:

14 Interestingly, the lamp in this case is not human “genius” or “personality,” as it would have been for Romantic writers, but “pentecostal fire,” an allusion to the Holy Spirit, an important presence in FQ.
“Experience alone is real...And although immediate experience is the foundation and the goal of our knowing, yet no experience is only immediate. There is no absolute point of view from which real and ideal can be finally separated and labelled” (qtd. Davidson 62).

While he realized this in his early student years the realization is more thoroughly developed and internalized in FQ than in TWL. Some Eliot scholars have discerned in his poetry a quality that might be the result of such integration: “belief.”

3. Renunciation of the autonomous text

FQ’s poetics of renunciation resists locating plenitude and presence either in experience or in logocentric rationality. Yet the poem also rejects a third form of knowledge: Literature itself. The poetry resists what De Man terms the “privileged” status of Literature, including the transparent text and stable sign: “it becomes imperative to show that literature constitutes no exception, that its language is in no sense privileged in terms of unity and truth over everyday forms of language” (Blindness 12). Bradbury and McFarlane note that the “language revolution” to which modernists responded resulted in “the disjunction between social discourse and literary discourse” due to the realization of “literary language as ‘autotelic’” (Modernism 328). Stèphane Mallarmé, upon whose essay De Man frames Blindness and Insight, makes a similar observation in his essay Crisis in Poetry. He rejects Romantic writers’ “artificial unity” of the book, recognizing that the ambivalence inherent in language enters into literature too and that every poem ultimately ends in “silence” (Mallarmé 41). Interestingly, Bakhtin also wrote

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15 Martin Warner basis his entire study on FQ on this insight, as expressed in the thesis: “Rationalists appeal to logic, empiricists to experience; language mediates between the two. The linguistic ‘music’ of Four Quartets moves...between precisely evoked, ‘echoed’, experience and its meaning...while exhibiting, as we have seen, a strenuous concern to preserve coherence...testing concept against experience and experience against concept, mediates between logic and emerge rhetoric, providing a context in which it may sometimes be appropriate to ‘argue that full understanding must identify itself with full belief’” (Warner 128).
against the idea of the unified, self-enclosed and “autotelic” text: “Literary language is not represented in the novel as a unitary, completely finished-off and indisputable language – it is represented precisely as a living mix of varied and opposing voices” (Dialogical 49).

*FQ* is fully aware of the artificiality of poetry itself. It resists giving itself a special status set apart from the problem of linguistic slippage, and therefore challenges Literature as an authoritative “mode of wisdom.” Indeed, one of the poem’s central personae – perhaps even its “hero” – is the “man of letters.” In the course of the poem the scholar is demystified about the “privileged” status of literature. Bakhtin already recognizes what De Man articulates decades later, that literature (and particularly the novel) has the potential to criticize its own artificiality from within. “This auto-criticism of discourse is one of the primary distinguishing features of the novel as a genre” (412).

One of the ways in which the novel accomplishes this “auto-critique” is by incorporating a “literary” hero who critiques the limitations of language himself: “The first type concentrates the critique and trial of literary discourse around the hero – a ‘literary man,’ who looks at life through the eyes of literature and who tries to live ‘according to literature’” (413). *FQ’s* man of letters undergoes a similar “demystification” of literature’s “privileged” position, resulting in the “testing of discourse” (413).

The eminent scholar’s voice is heard typically in each quartet’s second section. The fist stanzas evince the totalizing unity of the apparently transparent text that claims a “privileged” position in the world. The sections thematically revolve around a sense of cosmic order, and formally embody the theme through tight and consistent verse forms. *BN II* proceeds by the intricate rhyme scheme, abaccaddebbbee, and an iambic four-beat
line. The diction is more elevated and obscure than other stanzas, including phrases such as “the bedded axle-wheel,” “circulation of the lymph/ Are figured,” and “the figured leaf.” The subject of the stanza is nothing other than cosmic order and harmony, in the vein of the medieval “great chain of being:” “Below, the boarhound and the boar/ Pursue their pattern as before/ But reconciled among the stars.” All experience is apparently united in one cosmic pattern.

However, the next stanza immediately problematizes the lines and prevents their harmony from becoming a totalizing “pattern” throughout the poem as a whole. The demystified man of letters himself challenges the elevation of Literature. The speaker expresses his epistemological uncertainty (or humility) employing *via negativa* syntax: “at the still point, there the dance is,/ But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity.” Moreover, he consistently qualifies or retracts his statements: “I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where.” The speaker’s prosaic and didactic voice (“do not call it fixity”) provides striking contrast from the elevated and highly stylized previous stanza. The transition between both stanzas strategically juxtaposes the voice of Literature with the man of letters’ demystified one, or the voice of the scholar before and after his demystification. While the poetry may evince “belief” in the possibility of cosmic order it never forgets the limited means by which humans can know this order, and in the end the order takes on quite a different quality than often assumed. But that is to tread into Chapter Four. Suffice it to say that through constant qualifications, prosaic and didactic vocabulary and diction and *via negativa* syntax the scholar reminds readers of the artificiality of the *FQ* itself and challenges readers’ attempts to reify it.

*EC* II similarly resists valorizing Literature. Once again, the initial lines embody
cosmic order, employing a (fluid) rhyme scheme, consistent four-stress iambic lines, elevated diction (“Comets weep and Leonids fly...Whirled in a vortex”), and obscure allusions (“Simulates triumphal cars/ Deployed in constellated wards/ Scorpion fights against he Sun”). The lines of high art and Literature degenerate into the scholars’ prosaic qualifications: “That was a way of putting it – not very satisfactory:/ A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,/ Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle/ With words and meanings.” Just as the poetry reaches for plenitude the ensuing poetic betrays its artificiality. Moreover, the scholar proceeds to question “the wisdom of age,” thereby connecting poetic modes with modes of wisdom. His conclusion is instructive: “The only wisdom we can hope to acquire/ Is the wisdom of humility.” The line suggests the poem’s motivating project is to develop a poetic of humility.

The initial lines in DS II are set in a six-line stanzaic form, with a complex rhyme scheme (each line of the stanza has an end-stop rhyme with the corresponding line in the next stanza; all the first lines end with “ay”) and subtle allusions (“The bone’s prayer to Death its God”). The subject matter is specifically a cosmic “pattern” within all experience. The next stanza breaks the spell with, “Fruition, fulfillment, security or affection,/ Or even a very good dinner.” The next lines are key: “the sudden illumination-/ We had the experience but missed the meaning,/ And approach to the meaning restores the experience/ In a different form.” The speaker suggests that meaning (and therefore plenitude) transcend conscious awareness. The poetry does not expect the moment of “illumination” to come through the transcendent voice of the thunder.

Finally, LG II is cast in an eight-line, generally iambic four-beat line stanza, with a set rhyme scheme (aabbccdd). I will examine this section in greater detail in Chapter
Four, since it is pivotal to the poem. The subject is the death of earth’s four elements (the ultimate renunciation, since the elements structured the poem). In the next stanza the man of letters returns as a ghost and admits the futility of positive attempts to inscribe and stabilize meaning, or “To purify the dialect of the tribe.” In resisting logocentric judgment *FQ* evinces a mode of knowledge closer to humility. It is a form that does not fit easily in De Man’s plenitude/vacancy tension, for as we will see in Chapter Four humility rejects both terms in favor of a “real presence” that does not depend on speakers’ mastery of epistemological or linguistic forms.

*FQ*’s second sections obviously resist placing literature in a “privileged” position. The man of letters time and again shows “that literature constitutes no exception, that its language is in no sense privileged in terms of unity and truth over everyday forms of language” (*Blindness* 12). Yet *FQ* advances past even De Man’s (blindness and) insight. For De Man and Mallarmé, Literature’s essential reality is its irreducible ambivalence between plenitude and vacancy. Each thinker ironically re-asserts Literature’s privileged position under the guise of demystifying it, thereby falling once more into what Gunton considers modernity’s fundamental irony.\(^\text{16}\) De Man’s language about the ambivalent nature of literature hints towards its hyper-essentialism and valorization:

> Literature, unlike everyday language, begins on the far side of this knowledge [of demystification]; it is the only form of language free from the fallacy of unmediated expression...The self-reflecting mirror-effect by means of which a

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\(^\text{16}\) To recall Gunton’s basic claim: “the assertion of the rights of the many has paradoxically, dialectically perhaps, achieved the opposite, the subversion of the many by new and in some cases demonic versions of the one” (Gunton 33).
work of fiction asserts, by its very existence, its separation from empirical reality, its divergence, as a sign, from a meaning that depends for its existence on the constitutive activity of this sign, characterizes the work of literature in its essence. (Blindness 17)

Having just argued that literature enjoys no “privilege” over “everyday language” De Man proceeds to argue that it is “the only form of language free from the fallacy of unmediated expression.” Practically, then, literature does enjoy profound privileges as that which self-consciously demystifies. De Man ends his description confidently asserting that the self-conscious ambivalence in literature constitutes its very “essence.”

The language is reminiscent of ontology, and one might conclude that De Man actually valorizes the essential nature of the equivocal text. A similar conclusion can be drawn from his definition of “nothing:” “here, the consciousness does not result from the absence of something, but consists of the presence of nothingness. Poetic language names this void with ever-renewed understanding...This persistent naming is what we call literature” (18). As seen in Chapter One, De Man’s (and TWL’s) “nothingness” can signify an essential reality underlying all particular experiences. Even if the “presence” is “nothing,” De Man cannot depart from the notion that all literature signifies one thing: the void. He ends up committing the same sin towards “real absence” as he critiques others of committing towards “real presence.” Mallarmé falls into a similar contradiction. He, too, recognizes in literature an essential ambivalence between plenitude and absence, an ambivalence that reveals the inability of language to ever stabilize either plenitude or vacancy: “For our mind is the center of this hesitancy and oscillation” (Mallarmé 33). At the same time, the recognition leads him to exclaim, “Chimera, yes!” to the idea that
there is anything other than just “one book on earth,” since all books and all texts ultimately signify the same “oscillation” (41).

Both De Man and Mallarmé emphasize textuality to such a degree that they perpetrate the irony that Colin Gunton considers the primary characteristic of modernity, a re-institution of “the one” under the guise of “the many.” Such was the risk run by TWL as delineated in Chapters One and Two. While TWL admits “the many,” formally embodied in its “voice-collage,” it reacts to the resulting Babel by gesturing towards a divine voice. FQ similarly recognizes linguistic slippage and the limitation of judgment, experience and Literature, but “descends lower” and resists the temptation to return to “the one.” FQ develops a poetics of renunciation that resists three common modes of knowledge. Martin Warner articulates how both of Eliot’s long poems engage the problems of logocentrism differently: “the Waste Land enacts such deconstruction [of logocentrism] to which the sequence of Quartets is a response. The pre-modern ‘authorities’ of ‘Burnt Norton’ are not embroiled in the ‘Enlightenment’ project of achieving full understanding...with the self fully transparent to itself” (Warner 126). Both of Eliot’s long poems respond to linguistic slippage, but they do so from opposite sides of the abyss.

Conclusion

Atkins writes: “In his Cambridge University sermon, in March of 1948, Eliot spoke of the essential marks of Christianity as penitence and humility” (Atkins 128). Pollard, Bradbury and McFarlane and Beasley interpret Eliot’s post-conversion poem as “Christian” in that it retracts from the “presence of nothingness” into the unifying sensibility of High Anglicanism and logocentrism. However, FQ thematically and
formally evinces a keen awareness of the limitation, if not futility, of overly confident logocentrism. *FQ* responds by developing a poetics of renunciation with which it resists mastery over the sign and three modes of knowledge (judgment, experience and Literature). Perhaps Eliot first glimpsed the wisdom of renunciation when reflecting on Dante’s *Divine Comedy* in 1929, after which he wrote: “the effort and triumph of a new renunciation, greater than renunciation at the grave, because a renunciation of feelings that persist beyond the grave” (*Prose* 226). It remains to examine precisely what persists beyond the grave of renunciation.
In Chapter Three I argued that *FQ* recognizes the limits of overly confidant logocentrism by renouncing three common “modes of wisdom.” It responds not in despair but in humility. *FQ* disciplines its readers and personae in self-renunciation and enables them to approach a place of encounter with the Other. While *TWL* reacts to its crisis by gesturing towards a divine voice, *FQ* locates its hope in the possibility of dialogue. Divine presence is not revealed in the voice of the Thunder but intuited in the very possibility of dialogue.

**Self-displacement as a spiritual discipline**

*FQ*’s poetics of renunciation, I argue, enables movement towards a relational form of knowledge that might best be termed dialogical. I draw on Bakthin’s insights concerning Dostoevsky’s dialogical method, particularly because for Bakhtin dialogue is not only a communicative action but also an epistemological and ethical orientation: “Dostoevsky could hear dialogic relationships everywhere, in all manifestations of conscious and intelligent human life; where consciousness began, there dialogue began for him as well...Thus all relationships among external and internal parts and elements of his novel are dialogic in character, and he structured the novel as a whole as a ‘great dialogue’” ([Dostoevsky](#) 40). *TWL* moved towards dialogue, but its personae were isolated and fragmented on the one hand, and subsumed within one essential reality (of isolation) on the other. Its unity lay either in the activity of the reader, or in an underlying
order composed of its many fragments. *FQ*, accused of being all but monological, moves towards a different form of unity. Bakhtin articulates an alternative to the tension that can also be discerned in *FQ*: “Everyone interprets in his own way Dostoevsky’s ultimate word, but all equally interpret it as a single word, a single voice, a single accent, and therein lies their fundamental mistake. The unity of the polyphonic novel – a unity standing above the word, above the voice, above the accent – has yet to be discovered” (43). *FQ* might be read as a “great dialogue” whose unity is dialogism.

*LG*, the culmination of the Quartets, points most explicitly to the “solution” to the problem of attempted mastery on the one hand and linguistic slippage on the other. The entire cycle of poems culminates in a dialogue. In *LG* II the man of letters has become a pilgrim and has been purified (through the preceding poetics of renunciation) in order to enter into dialogue with a “dead master.” Before reading this climactic exchange, however, readers pass through *LG* I’s preparation. The speaker in *LG* I’s final two stanzas prepares the “pilgrim,” and the reader, for Little Gidding (a place of prayer). Each stanza begins with “If you came this way.../It would the same” and explains that all who approach would have to undergo the same process of purgation. The speaker’s primary “message” is to renounce self-confident mastery over experience and conceptualization: “what you thought you came for / Is only a shell, a husk of meaning.” After all, “It would be the same at the end of the journey...If you came not knowing what you came for.” Regardless of their social or economic standing, all speakers must approach in the same manner.

The speaker’s term “way” is crucial. It is both a noun (the road towards Little Gidding) and an adverb (the manner of approach). *FQ* is not satisfied with presenting
only an external “semantic center.” Beasley argues that *FQ* “aims to provide answers” (Beasley 113). Yet part of *FQ*’s “way” depends upon forming new habits of perceiving “the answer” in pilgrims themselves. Martin Warner and Douglas Atkins recognize that *FQ* is “about” the development of “embodied thought:” “For poetry...is not the assertion that something is true, but the making of that truth more fully real to us; it is the creation of a sensuous embodiment. It is the making of the Word Flesh” (Warner 120). We might say that *TWL* presents “the answer” (“DA”), whereas *FQ* is concerned with pilgrims’ and readers’ perception of the “solution.” What Eliot writes about Dante’s *Purgatorio* can be said of *FQ*: “It is a matter of gradual adjustment of our vision” (*Prose* 227).

The second stanza describes the central activity of Little Gidding, and the way (the manner in which) one must attain it:

...you would have to put off

Sense and notion. You are not here to verify,

Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity

Or carry report.

Sense and notion can be glossed as experience and judgment. The goal of the pilgrimage (and *FQ*) is to become the kind of pilgrim that can “put off/ Sense and notion.”

Significantly, the poetry employs negations to formally enact the renunciation it counsels: “You are not here to verify.” The speaker proceeds:

...You are here to kneel

Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more

Than an order of words, the conscious occupation

Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.
The lines are unambiguous. Prayer does not ultimately depend on the competence or linguistic mastery of pray-ers (those who pray), although incorrect pray-ing can forestall the process. Prayer constitutes a form of communication that does not require denotative language or even linguistic competence, for “the communication/ Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living. /Here, the intersection of the timeless moment.” The lines move from pray-ers’ renunciation of mastery to the event that enables effective communication: intersection. Self-renunciation enables prayer, but prayer depends on an “intersection point” independent of pray-ers.

We saw in Chapter Three that renunciation in _FQ_ takes the form of displacement from immediacy. Renunciation becomes a discipline that prepares the pilgrim for encounter with the Other. This reading differs substantially from that of critics’ who define _FQ_’s “purity” as its imposition of “one” sensibility or framework on “many” experiences: “it is as if Eliot’s model for the poet is now Henry Higgins instead of Sir James Frazer, the magisterial phonetician refining the speech of Lil and her friends into an ideal language instead of the oral anthropologist recovering the immediacy of their primitive speech to renew poetry” (Pollard 102). For Pollard, purification means homogenizing speech by imposing correct language on the voices of the English folk. Pollard argues that Eliot attempts this purification because of his desire for unity: “Eliot decides to purify the dialect of the tribe primarily to recover a sense of European cultural unity” (105). For Mallarmé, who influenced Eliot in his desire to “purify the language of the tribe,” linguistic pluralism was problematic: “Languages are imperfect because multiple; the supreme language is missing...the diversity of languages on earth means that no one can utter words which would bear the miraculous stamp of Truth Herself
Incarnate” (Mallarmé 38). Mallarmé responded by attempting to create “pure poetry:” “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” (43). This vision of purity subsumes the “many” in the “one.” As I have argued in Chapter One and Two, it describes TWL as accurately as FQ. For TWL finally ends by fashioning “a single new word which is total in itself and foreign to the language – a kind of incantation.”

Eliot and Mallarmé were far from the only poets to recognize two broadly different orientations towards writing poetry, orientations that hint towards a corresponding emphasis on the one or the many. Herbert Read defines character as “the tragic conformity of a man to his definition” (Read 29). Bakhtin’s own anxiety over lyric poetry as a genre stems from his sense that it imposes one voice on experience: “poetry, striving for maximal purity, works in its own language as if that language were unitary, the only language, as if there were no heteroglossia outside it” (Dialogical 399). According to these definitions of “purity,” the older Eliot could be read searching for “character” in order to imposes external standards on his poetry. However, FQ’s poetics renounce both judgment (i.e. character) and experience, or the “ego [which] is a synthesis of the sensations” (Read 29). FQ moves past a common modernist tension (character vs. personality). It approaches closer to Read’s prescription than many have noticed, towards “Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties...mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Read 39).

In analyzing Eliot’s post-conversion essays Douglas Atkins notices a constant move away from self-coincidence: “Eliot’s writing....traces an arc, away from self-
control, and toward (self-) surrender, submission, and acceptance” (Atkins 128). Atkins casts his observations in theological vocabulary: “Eliot ultimately rejected [Irving Babbitt’s] idea...that ‘self-control’ is not only a possible but an effective deterrent to such temptations as result of what we Christians call sin” (Atkins 125). For Atkins, *FQ* admits the problem of “sin” (the “sin,” I argue, of self-mastery and linguistic mastery), but does not respond by seeking greater “self-control.” We can read Atkins’ argument in line with Herbert Read’s distinction between character and personality. Although many critics read *FQ* as a more classical poem than *TWL*, its distinct form of purity actually prohibits an elevated concern over “character.”

Rowan Williams, the current archbishop of Canterbury, goes even further than Atkins in providing a theological framework for self-displacement. Williams will be a key figure in Chapter Four largely because he provides a theological vocabulary for considering Eliot’s Anglican sensibility. Williams explains that many medieval mystics “depict a human self that is radically unstable and incomplete, struggling to find a way of representing itself. It is...homeless in the world, trained to be suspicious of any sense of gratification and completion” (Williams 71). So far his description could apply to *TWL* as much as to *FQ*. In delineating Luther’s response to such “homelessness,” however, Williams provides a framework for considering the poems’ differences. Luther determined

...to tear the self away from a quest for its own centre and ground it in a wholly alien yet wholly accepting divine initiative. But...if that alien love is removed

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1 Atkins’ draws on his past work on the essay genre: the essay “exists as the site where certain important differences – even oppositions – meet and content” (Atkins 91). For the essay form, then, “Reconciliation implies as it requires impurity” (Atkins 127). Like Kenner and Moody, Atkins recognizes *FQ*’s multiplicity and polyphony. He contributes a vocabulary for re-thinking the nature of *FQ*’s “purity.”
from the picture, what is left is the characteristically modern self, desiring, dissatisfied, homeless...[leading to] an intense skepticism, an acknowledgement of the fact that at the centre of every human reality is an absence...Suppose the worst, suppose a void at the heart of humanity, a lack of any principle of continuity or integrity in the self; yes, but this is precisely where the alien claim of God's gift makes itself clear. (71,72)

For Luther, faith in divine presence did not inhibit experience of a “real absence.” TWL has “supposed the worst, a void at the heart of humanity.” But it responds by a quest – enacted by the Questing Knight - of finding “its own centre” (“DA”). FQ similarly recognizes the “void” but responds by “tearing itself away from a quest for its own centre and grounding it in a wholly alien yet wholly accepting divine initiative.” FQ does not encounter the “divine initiative” in spite, but by means, of self-displacement and even linguistic slippage. Williams realizes that self-displacement constitutes one means for intuiting divine presence in a world where the void is felt: "Spiritual disciplines are invariably methods of challenging the assumption that I - my conscious, willing ego - stand at the centre of all patterns of meaning...they all direct themselves to this 'decentering' exercise" (110).² Williams considers the act of studying a “decentering exercise.” We can extend his argument to the act of reading FQ, whose poetic technique consistently displaces readers’ self-coincidence. This internal discipline is cast into narrative form in the course of the man of letters’ journey.

² Martin Warner also argues that FQ encourages self-displacement. He emphasizes the results in terms of human communcions: “With self forgotten we are freed to relate to those around us with ‘love beyond desire’” (Warner 117).
Through the process of self-displacement and renunciation of mastery, the “dead master” in LG II reaches a place where words “suffice:” “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...When I left my body on a distant shore.” Critics differ in their interpretations of the identity of the “peregrine spirit.” In his commentary on FQ, Thomas Howard lists a few possibilities: “Dante? Homer? Virgil? Eliot would insist...that any poet owes unpayable debts to these gentlemen” (Howard 131). I read him as a “dead master,” a previous poet. He certainly appears to be returning from beyond the grave. He has therefore undergone the ultimate self-displacement: death. Death, in FQ, becomes the (metaphorical) requirement for entering into dialogue.

**Incarnation as grounds for dialogical mediation**

In addition to undergoing self-displacement, the dead master enters into dialogue from “between two worlds.” Dialogue is enabled at a place of between-ness and mediation. The speaker continues: in the “intersection point,” he and the dead master are “compliant to the common wind...In concord at this intersection time/ Of meeting nowhere, no before and after,/ We trod the pavement in a dead patrol.” The “common wind” alludes to the Holy Spirit, the divine person who dwells in each saint and provides commonality between each. The “intersection point” is therefore ultimately Incarnation. Words finally “suffice” when speakers have renounced self-coincidence and meet in a common place (Incarnation).

Rowan Williams once again offers a theological framework for understanding FQ’s dialogical grounds. For Williams, the church – the communion of the living and the
dead – exists as a dynamic unity because it dwells in the pre-existing logos. Individuals enter into communion when they take communion (i.e. the Word of God made flesh). Saints therefore retain their individual identity but cohere in a greater unity. The persistence of the church across space and time testifies to its dialogical nature: “That witness has to do with a promise of universal community that is grounded not in assumptions about universal right and reason but in a narrative displaying how communication is made possible between strangers by a common relatedness to God's presence and act in history - in a historical person” (Williams 113). Williams consistently returns to the reality of the common word, logos, as the grounds for communication within the church: "The unity of the earliest centuries, then, lies partly in this mutual recognition of language grounded in a common sense of holiness, suffering and sovereignty” (53). As concerned as it is with the “communion of the dead” and the possibility of dialogue – can be read as instilling precisely this “vision of what it mean[s] to be a community living by the written Word.” The ensuing “community” never resorts to establishing itself as a static center, but persists as a dynamic unity.

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3 The language resembles Eliot’s own vocabulary for exploring cultural unity: “It is a recurrent theme of this essay, that a people should be neither too united nor too divided, if its culture is to flourish” (Christianity 123).

4 Interestingly, Eliot articulates a similar vision in writing about literature in Christianity and Culture: “every literature must have some sources which are peculiarly its own, deep in its own history; but, also, and at least equally important, are the sources which we share in common: that is, the literature of Rome, of Greece and of Israel” (Christianity 190).

5 Or in Rosenstock- Huessy’s words: “Human language is not complete without the democracy of universal participation by which an undying speech, through the ages, is ascertained...Language survives any individual speaker” (Speech119). The implication is that “To speak means to re-enact cosmic processes so that these processes may reach others. In every sentence, man acts within the cosmos, and establishes a social relation for the sake of saving the cosmos from wasting acts in vain” (121).

6 Colin Gunton attempts to move past the one/many dynamic by pointing to a community with a similar nature. He upholds perichoresis, the doctrine that describes the interrelationship of the persons of the Trinity, as the ultimate dynamic unity: “It is not a spirit of merging or assimilation
Critics have posited a few basic models for understanding the nature of the “intersection point.” For Atkins, Incarnation comprises the comprehensive framework for *FQ*. It represents the ultimate meeting of two disparate qualities. Rather than achieving immediacy, the glory of Incarnation is its mediation between divinity and humanity, eternity and temporality: “Incarnation and its being as in-between transcendence and immanence” (Atkins 91). For Atkins, *FQ*’s purity is its mediation between different “spheres of existence,” always enabled through the Incarnation: *FQ* “exists as the site where certain important differences – even oppositions – meet and contend” (91). Atkins’ model neglects the deeply personal nature of *FQ*’s “meeting of opposites.” Bakhtin’s framework allows us to read “mediation” as a distinctly communicative activity, and therefore a distinctly personal one. Yet Atkins provides a valuable insight when claiming that Incarnation is “common to all” saints.

**The dialogue**

After undergoing the preparatory self-renunciation in *LG* I the pilgrim (and reader) are prepared for entering into dialogue with the Other. *LG* II dramatizes what *LG* I describes. The dialogue is specifically the prayer that the pilgrim prays as he kneels in Little Gidding. *LG* II constitutes the only explicit dialogue in the entire poem. We can think of it as re-writing “A Game of Chess,” the only explicit dialogue in *TWL*. *FQ* therefore displaces *TWL*, enacting self-renunciation on a structural level across Eliot’s poetic vocation.⁷ In rewriting the section *FQ* not only qualifies *TWL*’s thematic perspective but also formally enacts renunciation and displacement.

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7 In studying the nature of a “Christian poetics,” Michael Edwards discusses the role of re-
The passage employs many of the poetic figures and forms outlined in Chapter Three, including paradox, allusive imagery and displacement. The setting employs natural imagery and geographical descriptions that cannot be visualized. It is set “In the uncertain hour before the morning,” in the bombed-out streets of London.\(^8\) The following descriptions are not inaccurate but allusive: “Near the ending of interminable night/ At the recurrent end of the unending,” and later “I met one walking, loitering and hurried.” These formal devices recall LG I’s “between melting and freezing,” and “A glare that was blindness.” The poetry formally embodies being “between two worlds.” Its allusive, even symbolist, practice enables it to point towards a place neither here nor there.

\(FQ\)’s previous “‘decentering’ exercise” has moved its personae and readers to a place where they are enabled to encounter the other through dialogue. In order to understand the nature of dialogue in \(FQ\) it would be helpful to introduce another thinker whom Eliot greatly esteemed. Buber (1878-1965) wrote from within a similar historical context to Eliot’s. Buber wrote in response to capitalism’s tendency to mechanize society and quantify persons. In particular, Buber discerned a trend towards approaching other persons as objects: “But it is just the relation of man to speech and to conversation that the crisis characteristic of our age has in particular tended to shatter. The man in crisis will no longer entrust his cause to conversation because its presupposition – trust – is writing. Re-writing becomes a form of self-displacement. The apostle Paul underwent “dispossession” after his conversion, shedding his cultural and situational personality (Edwards 235). Paul reveals the literary equivalent when he “un-reads” and “re-reads” Scripture: “one could argue that in fact the New Testament as a totality is the rewriting of the Old,” where the old becomes a ”palimpsest, over which the New is carefully and scrupulously inscribed” (236). It is not un-reasonable to read \(FQ\) as a “palimpsest” placed “carefully and scrupulously” over \(TWL\). \(FQ\) converts \(TWL\)’s despair over the void to despair over mastery of the void, and therein lies its hope.

\(^8\) Thomas Howard glosses the lines: “The scene may...be taken to be the rubble of London in the early morning during the blitz in 1940, just after the German bombers have headed back across the North Sea” (Howard 130).
lacking” (Knowledge 236). Like Bakhtin (and, I argue, Eliot), Buber realized that speakers’ orientation towards language would dictate to some extent their relationship to other speakers. He placed hope not in recovering a “semantic center,” however, but in re-capturing moments of encounter with the Other: “The hope for this hour depends upon the renewal of dialogical immediacy between men...also between the being called man and the source of his existence” (228). Buber’s thought combines Bakhtin’s insight into discourse with Williams’ into the nature of the church. I argue that FQ similarly places its hope in renewing “dialogical immediacy.” (I employ “dialogical mediation” instead of Buber’s “dialogical immediacy.” While both terms might be used fruitfully in relation to FQ, I employ mediation in order to argue that language mediates between opposites.) Williams helped us understand FQ’s constant displacements as a discipline that prepared readers and personae for dialogue. Buber and Bakhtin enable us to see dialogue as an epistemological form.

With these clarifications we can now return to LG II. As the pilgrim addresses the dead master he becomes estranged and mysterious to himself:

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

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9 For Buber, “Being true to the being in which and before which I am placed is the one thing that is needful” (Pointing x).
The pilgrim becomes a “double” self in dialoguing with the other since he has been displaced from himself.\textsuperscript{10} As was the case with Dostoevsky, so in \textit{LG} II “A man never coincides with himself.” The speakers in this dramatic scene therefore “acutely sense their own inner unfinalizability” (Dostoevsky 59). The self can only be known and realized through the process of dialogue (59). The “dead master” in \textit{FQ} II is “a face still forming,” a person in the process of becoming through dialogue.\textsuperscript{11}

The conversation leads to the question of the nature of purity, particularly purity of language. The pilgrim is only able to ask his question because he renounces mastery over logocentric conceptualization: “‘speak: / I may not comprehend, may not remember.’” He has successfully “put off sense and notion,” and asks not for a definition or for “objective knowledge” but essentially for an encounter (“speak”). The dead master reveals to the pilgrim the impermanence and slippage of language, “sense and notion.” He admits, in words that echo Mallarmé’s, that “our concern was speech, and speech impelled us / To purify the dialect of the tribe,” but realizes the vapidity of such a project: “last year’s words belong to last year’s language/ And next year’s await another voice.” In admitting the temporality of all words the master de-emphasizes the importance of particular vocabulary, idiom and dialect.

\textsuperscript{10} One might read the speaker’s assumption of a “double part” as his divided consciousness. On this reading the older, wiser self visits the younger one (perhaps in memory) to grant him the “gifts reserved for age.” If this were the case, then the poem dramatizes another profound moment of non-coincidence with self, and meeting of two “spheres of existence.” Wisdom of renunciation enables (metaphorically) renouncing one’s younger self, while not becoming absent to it. This reading provides a model for how the poem maintains harmony between the one and the many in an individual’s psyche. While this reading is viable, I read the dialogue as a prayer given the textual evidence in the preceding stanza.

\textsuperscript{11} Bakhtin summarizes Dostoevsky’s artistic vision: “The essence of his work – both its content and its form – is the struggle against a \textit{reification} of man, of human relations, of all human values under the conditions of capitalism...this \textit{reifying devaluation} of man had permeated into all the pores of contemporary life” (62). Bakhtin shares this fundamental concern with Buber and Huessy, and, I argue, Eliot himself.
Rather than stating the positive progress that he has made, the theories he has
discovered or the experience he can generalize into a rule, the dead master catalogues the
vacant results of such efforts: “the cold friction of expiring sense…the conscious impotent
of rage/ the rending pain of re-enactment/ Of all that you have done, and been.” The
(stereo-)typical logocentric project of rational progress and “purification” of diction is
sterile at best, destructive at worst. But “humility is endless:” “From wrong to wrong the
exasperated spirit/ Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire/ Where you must move
in measure, like a dancer.”

The only hope for “progress” lies in the via negativa. The master has learned to renounce that which falsifies and distances the self from true
wisdom.

While many applaud TWL for its “linguistic pluralism” and critique FQ for its
totalizing sensibility, it appears that FQ develops a poetic in which the one and the many
are preserved in harmony. What Gunton provides with perichoresis, Bakhtin with
dialogism, and Buber with encounter, Eliot finds in the “communion of the living with
the dead.” Each thinker finds a model for preserving both the one and the many in
societies that threaten to valorize one or the other. Each attempt to realize what Gunton
describes of perichoresis: “It is not a spirit of merging or assimilation – of
homogenization – but of relation in otherness, relation which does not subvert but
establishes the other in its true reality” (182).

Contrary to Pollard’s, Hough’s and

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12 It is significant that the final image is that of the dancer, for perichoresis, the dance within the
Trinity, is for Gunton “one way of expressing the unity and plurality of the being of the God
whose interaction with the world is unified and yet diverse,” and therefore preserves the one and
the many “in dynamic interrelations” (Gunton 163).

13 For Gunton, “God appears to be conceived neither as a collectivity nor as an individual, but as
a community, a unity of persons in relation” (Gunton 215). The model “is Heraclitean in the sense
that it is not aimless flux, but a flux which has a logos, or rather is a logos, the logic of its own
being in relation” (164).
Beasley’s readings, Eliot may have been motivated specifically by a desire for “particularity and relationality” when composing *FQ*. In *Christianity and Culture* he claims:

Totalitarianism appeals to the desire to return to the womb. The contrast between religion and culture imposes a strain: we escape from this strain by attempting to revert to an identity of religion and culture which prevailed at a more primitive stage; as when we indulge in alcohol as an anodyne, we consciously seek unconsciousness. It is only by unremitting effort that we can persist in being individuals in a society, instead of merely members of a disciplined crowd.

(*Christianity* 142)

*FQ*’s poetic renounces self-mastery and self-coincidence and encounters the Other through dialogue. As it is for Buber and Bakhtin, dialogue is an epistemological and ethical category in *FQ*. *FQ* reacts against attempts to establish an “objective” center, or what Huessy calls the “naive arrogance of the school that reality can and has been divided into objects and subjects,” by seeking dialogical mediation (*Speech* 85).

**Polyphony**

For Bakhtin, dialogism depends on polyphony. His central insight (captured in the concept of heteroglossia) is that language never belongs to one speaker but to all who have ever spoken:

The word...never gravitates toward a single consciousness or a single voice. The life of the word is contained in its transfer from one mouth to another, from one context to another context, from one social collective to another, from one
generation to another generation....[A speaker] receives the word from another’s voice and [is] filled with that other voice. (Dostoevsky 202)

Huessy arrives at the same conclusion: “Human language is not complete without the democracy of universal participation by which an undying speech, through the ages, is ascertained...Language survives any individual speaker,” and therefore “words are not his private words but the language of the community” (Speech 119, 85). The epistemological implication for Bakhtin and Huessy is that persons are only ever realized in the process of dialoguing with others.

Rather than “purifying” language by imposing correct diction or classical form on it, $FQ$ re-imagines the “solution” to the problem of linguistic slippage as “dialogical immediacy.” $FQ$ incorporates words of historical figures in order to formally demonstrate how “Language survives any individual speaker” (119). The voice of Julian of Norwich is integrated throughout $LG$ in the phrases “sin is behovely” (III), “With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling,” (V) and finally “all shall be well and/ All manner of thing shall be well” (III, V). The meaning of the words depends simultaneously on the individual voice of the speaker and on all speakers who have previously spoken it (“All is always now”). Peace in $TWL$ necessitated one voice. In $FQ$ peace comes from the possibility of communication across generations enabled by the dynamic nature of the word: “That it is possible, in teaching and learning, to weave a pattern of contemporaneity around people of different classes, is the great example of pacification in society. Hence, the dialogue in the classroom...It is a victory over natural differences in the temporal order of men” (34).

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14 Or the short version: “Language is a system of social relations” (Speech 118).
Isolated, Dostoevsky’s characters “acutely sense their own inner unfinalizability” since “a man never coincides with himself” (Dostoevsky 59). Bakhtin does not employ Williams’ language of self-renunciation but his theory implies (if not necessitates) the value of continual deferral of immediacy, or self-coincidence. Dostoevsky’s characters therefore always live on the “threshold” between two states: “Everything in [Dostoevsky’s] world lives on the very border of its opposite. Love lives on the very border of hate, knows and understands it,” for only on this border are selves oriented “toward another’s discourse” (Dostoevsky 176, 185). Bakhtin articulates a vision of society in which individuals are neither trapped within solipsistic isolation (“the many”) nor engulfed within tyrannical unity (“the one”). For Bakhtin, Huessy, Buber and (I argue) Eliot, speakers react to “the void” most authentically by admitting self-displacement and thereby entering into dialogue with the Other.

In addition, as seen in LG II dialogue in FQ is enabled specifically at the meeting of two borders. The dialogue is set in “the uncertain hour before the morning/ Near the ending of interminable night;” “Between three districts;” the “dead master” is “Both one and many...The eyes of a familiar compound ghost;” and the dialogue occurs “at this intersection time/ Of meeting nowhere, no before and after.” The dramatic scene is set on the borders of living and dead, morning and night, here and there, familiarity and strangeness. For it is at the borders that speakers are displaced and must listen in attentiveness to the other. Bakhtin’s claim about Dostoevsky’s method can therefore be applied to FQ: “Everything in [Dostoevsky’s] world lives on the very border of its opposite. Love lives on the very border of hate, knows and understands it...Opposites come together, look at one another, are reflected in one another, know and understand
one another” (Dostoevsky 176). Encounter with the other comes not from logical conceptualization or theoretical unification but from bringing seemingly disparate voices and perspectives into communication with each other.

The poetic of paradox we noticed in Chapter Three resists over-confident theorizing, but also positively brings opposites into communication. \textit{FQ} constantly crosses the border between past and future, resisting readers’ desire to attain “understanding” through chronology. \textit{BN} begins by just such a resistance: “Time present and time past/ Are both perhaps present in time future,/ And time future contained in time past.” The paradox employed in describing the pool likewise brings together ineffable plenitude and vacancy: “Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,/ And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight...Then a cloud passed, and then pool was empty.” The poetry brings opposite states together while refusing to authorize or legitimate one over the other. High and low meet, as in the case of “Garlic and sapphires” (\textit{BN} II), “eminent men of letters” and “petty contractors” (\textit{EC} III), “To communicate with Mars” and to “release omens/ By sortilege, or tea leaves” (\textit{DS} V), the “death of hope and despair...Dead water and dead sand...the death of water and fire” (\textit{LG} II), and finally the “common” and the “formal” word (\textit{LG} V). In weaving “opposites” into the fabric of the poetry Eliot creates a polyphonic poetic. The attempt is not to integrate so as to diminish the identity and individuality of any one perspective or voice.\footnote{Hugh Kenner claims that “Eliotic opposites may be resolved in contrary ways” (Kenner 306). Eliot consistently longs for integration of faculties, yet \textit{FQ} does not subsume the many in the one. The many therefore meet at the borders of various “spheres of existence.”} Nor is the point to simply give voice to irreconcilable differences, thereby leading to chaos and solipsism as was the case in \textit{TWL} (on my reading).
Moreover, every person, thing and even idea in FQ is given a voice. FQ apparently looks at the world with the same eyes as Dostoevsky: “The polyphonic novel is dialogic through and through...Dostoevsky could hear dialogic relationships everywhere, in all manifestations of conscious and intelligent human life; where consciousness began, there dialogue began for him as well....Thus all relationships among external and internal parts and elements of his novel are dialogic in character, and he structured the novel as a whole as a ‘great dialogue’” (Dostoevsky 40). As we saw in Chapter Three, FQ casts competing modes of knowledge in various voices. The autonomous text is cast in the voice of an erudite scholar in the Quartets’ second sections, and the voice of experience in a voice resembling symbolists.

In BN nature is even given a voice: “Quick, said the bird, find them” despite “The deception of the thrush.” The bird “called, in response to/ The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery,” and the section closes with the bird’s voice: “Go, go go, said the bird: human kind/ Cannot bear very much reality.” FQ points to a “reality” beyond an empiricist’s perception and a rationalist’s conception. The poem orients itself towards every sentient being dialogically, therefore fulfilling Buber’s maxim: “Being true to the being in which and before which I am placed is the one thing that is needful” (Pointing x).16 “Being true” for Buber and Bakhtin always requires listening to the other’s voice.

EC II gives voice to the dead: “In daunsinge, signigyng matrimonie -...Two and two, necessarype coniunction.” Interestingly, this line employs the only regional dialect in the entire poem. Whereas dialect in TWL emphasized economic differences, here it emphasizes temporal differences, differences that are far more profound. In EC V nature

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16 Huessy offers a similar maxim: “‘Listen and society will live,’ is the first statement and the perpetual promise of any social researcher” (Speech 24).
is again given a voice: “The wave cry, the wind cry, the cast waters/ Of the petrel and the porpoise.” Repetition of “cry” suggests that words do not belong to individuals, and also acknowledges the limitation under which all speakers are bound. Immediately prior to these lines the poetry affirmed “the pattern more complicated/ Of dead and living...a further union, a deeper communion.” “The pattern” and the dance are crucial images for *FQ*. When read in light of Bakhtin we can interpret them as suggesting that individual words grow out of preceding systems of relations.

DS I is structured around the city river. The passage implicitly critiques the modern industrial perception of the river as a tool for conveying capital. The speaker perceives the river as a person replete with its own distinct voice: “I think that the river/ Is a strong brown god...Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyor of commerce; Then only a problem confronting the builder of bridges./ The problem once solved, the brown god is almost forgotten” and so on. After re-enchanting the river the speaker places its voice in dialogue with the city inhabitants: “The river is within us, the sea is all about us...The starfish, the hermit crab, the whale’s backbone...The sea has many voices...The sea howl/ And the sea yelp, are different voices.” Employing the first person plural suggests commonality between the voices of nature and those of the fishermen’s wives waiting their husbands’ return: “Where is there an end of it, the soundless wailing...Where is the end of them, the fishermen sailing/ Into the wind’s tail...There is no end of it, the voiceless wailing...the past has another pattern.”

*TWL* does include some voices from the non-human realm, though perhaps not as many. The nightingale’s voice resounds throughout: “’Jug Jug’” (*TWL* II), and later “’Twit twit twit/ Jug jug jug jug jug jug...Tereu” (*TWL* III). Yet in *TWL* the voices are “are
self-enclosed and deaf; they do not hear and do not answer one another. There are not and cannot be any dialogic relationships among them. They neither argue nor agree. But all three personages, with their self-enclosed worlds” (Dostoevsky 70). Here is a signal difference in the nature of TWL’s and FQ’s polyphony. In FQ the bird speaks to the narrator and the readers: “Quick, said the bird, find them, find them./ Round the corner” (BN I). The bird and music dialogue (“And the bird called, in response to/ The unheard music”), as do the flowers and readers (“the roses/ Had the look of flowers that are looked at./ They were our guests, accepted and accepting”). In TWL the voices of the birds, like the other voices, spoke but never dialogued. The voices are not dialogically oriented towards one another, and isolation becomes the resulting (almost existential) reality. One might deduce from such evidence that FQ is actually more polyphonic than TWL, and certainly more dialogical. The only voice that FQ does not incorporate, and TWL does, is the voice of a divine presence.

Dialogism constitutes an epistemological solution to the problem of the lost “semantic center.” In his essay “The Three Voices of Poetry” Eliot hints towards an epistemological and even ethical perspective on literary discourse that closely resembles Bakhtin’s dialogism. He delineates the different voices:

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What Bakhtin’s observes in Tolstoy’s story resonates with elements of TWL. Voices are “juxtaposed and made meaningful to one another in the author’s unified field of vision and consciousness that encompasses them...The author, who is located outside them and takes advantage of his external position to give them a definitive meaning, to finalize them” (Dostoevsky 70). Clearly Eliot structures FQ carefully, and we can say that the author gives meaning to the speakers in this sense. Yet on a close reading of the relation between voices in TWL and FQ, it seems that TWL’s voices do not communicate with each other, and essentially signify their sexual (and existential) sterility, isolation and fragmentation. The meaning of these voices is perhaps imposed from the outside, even if the organization is apparent fragmentation.
The first voice is the voice of the poet talking to himself – or nobody. The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse, when he is saying, not what he would say in his own person, but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character. (Poetry 96)

Eliot admits that the first two voices are limiting. The first voice is more like “meditative verse:” “an insert embryo....and, on the other hand, the Language, the resources of the words at the poet’s command. He has something germinating in him for which he must find words but he cannot know what words he wants until he has found the words ” (106). He admits dissatisfaction with the second voice too: “that of myself addressing – indeed haranguing – an audience” (99). The description resembles Bakhtin’s of monologism. Eliot only came to the third voice after years of writing poetry. According to him, it was his latest, and most fortunate, discovery, and one he stumbled across while listening to a dialogue from the Pickwick Papers: “’Well, Mrs. Cluppins,’ said Sergeant Buzfuz, ‘you were not listening, but you heard the voices.’ It was in 1938, then, that the third voice began to force itself upon my ear” (99).

Eliot turns to Shakespeare to explain the third voice: “When we listen to a play by Shakespeare, we listen not to Shakespeare but to his characters; when we read a dramatic monologue by Browning, we cannot suppose that we are listening to any other voice than that of Browning himself” (104). Eliot is essentially describing the difference between a monological and a polyphonic, or dialogical, text. He concludes: “All that matters is, that in the end the voices should be heard in harmony; and, as I have said, I doubt whether in
any real poem only one voice is audible” (111). Eliot wrote his essay after completing *FQ*, when he became increasingly interested in the dramatic form specifically because of its possibilities with voice. In *TWL* Eliot is clearly attuned to “linguistic pluralism,” but dialogism has not yet become an existential or epistemological category. By the time he completed *FQ* (1943) he had discovered the “three voices”. I argue that one can notice its nascent presence in *FQ* as a whole. Eliot’s concept of voices in poetry closely resembles Huessy’s realization that “words are not [the speaker’s] private words but the language of the community” (*Speech* 85). While Eliot may have always had an ear for voices as a poet, distinct in this essay is the desire for a harmony between them: a dialogue. Eliot admits that this realization came late to him, but is now of supreme importance. What he came to realize first in 1938 was “the difference, the abyss, between writing for the first and for the third voice” (102). I have argued that *FQ* sees *TWL*’s void but responds with a different solution. Eliot’s essay suggests that he revises his concept of the “abyss” itself as the attempt to make “only one voice audible.” For the older Eliot, the abyss is not linguistic instability but the very attempt to establish “a single, just speech” (Edwards 107). If *FQ* desires unity it is the harmonious unity of dialogism.

In the fifth sections of each quartet the speaker admits linguistic slippage while simultaneously delineating language’s nature as a dynamic pattern. After all, “the way up is the way down.” In *BN 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.” Whereas linguistic slippage in *TWL* resulted in all words signifying “the presence of nothingness,” their tendency to “slip, slide, perish” here signifies upon a pattern that transcends speakers’ knowledge of
denotative words. Individual definitions are de-emphasized as the significance of the language system is fore-grounded. The pattern finally leads to “the hidden laughter/ Of children in the foliage/ Quick now, here, now always.”

In the first section of LG V the speaker articulates the closest thing to a language theory intrinsic in the poem. The first few lines re-articulate temporality, thereby acknowledging the fluctuation inherent in human experience and the futility of theorizing. The passage then moves specifically to the nature of words:

... And every phrase
And every sentence that is right (where every word is at home,
Taking its place to support the others,
The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
An easy commerce of the old and the new,
The common word exact without vulgarity,
The formal word precise but not pedantic,
The complete consort dancing together)
Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning

Words derive meaning from their relation to previous and surrounding words (“an easy commerce of the old and new”), not by isolated definitions. The speaker employs classic via negativa sentence structure to denote the dependence of all words on each other (rather than some objective definition): “The word neither diffident nor ostentatious...The common word exact without vulgarity/ The formal word precise but not pedantic.” The poetry both thematically and formally suggests that words’ meaning lies in their relations
to other words. Even as it casts its positive vision of communication the poetry employs *via negativa* syntax, formally resisting attempts to stabilize (i.e. monologize) this vision.

In his essay, “The Music of Poetry,” Eliot articulates a theory of language that closely resembles the one above:

The music of a word is, so to speak, at a point of intersection: it arises from its relation first to the words immediately preceding and following it, and indefinitely to the rest of its context; and from another relation, that of its immediate meaning in that context to all the other meanings which it has had in other contexts, to its greater or less wealth of association. (*Prose* 113)

Language is a system of relations that depends upon the meaning accrued to words across space and time, quite apart from speakers’ intents. Again, Bakhtin provides a vocabulary for this insight: “The life of the word is contained in its transfer from one mouth to another...from one social collective to another, from one” (*Dostoevsky* 202). The stakes for Bakhtin are individual freedom on the one hand (represented by voice) and human community on the other (by dialogue). Eliot’s linguistic theory retains both values, so that “The complete consort [of words] dans[es] together.”

**The divine voice, and the response of the dialogical community**

Reading *FQ* in light of Bakhtin, Williams, Gunton and Huessy enables us to interpret its poetics of renunciation as a poetic that positively points towards dialogical interrelationships. The final crucial distinction between *TWL* and *FQ* concerns their postures towards a divine presence or absence. *TWL* gestures towards a divine voice as salvation for its fragmentation and isolation. However, *FQ* – a poem that many consider Eliot’s retreat into dogmatism – never posits such a voice. Each quartet’s fourth section
hints at a divine presence, but always mediated through a community of speakers. Hugh Kenner observes that “the fourth movements name successively the Unmoved Mover, the redeeming Son, the Virgin, and the Holy Ghost” (Kenner 307). These sections devoted to the divine voice are cast in the lyric poetic genre and employ the first person plural, but withhold epical immediacy.

_**BN IV**_ introduces the “Unmoved Mover:” “Will the sunflower turn to us, will the clematis/ Stray down, bend to us...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.” The end of IV returns to the mystic’s imagery, where light and silence indicate an ineffable divine presence. The “kingfisher’s wing” possibly alludes to George Hopkins’ “As kingfishers catch fire.” Hopkins’ poem demonstrates how “Christ plays in ten thousand places.” Christ’s presence is sensed through the lives of the “kingfisher,” the “dragonflies,” the “stones” and the “bell.” _**FQ**_ expresses a similar vision of the divine presence, except cast in linguistic terms. To appropriate Hopkins’ insight, we might say that the (divine) Word is played in ten thousand words. The section formally embodies its posture through employing the first person plural: “us.” The divine presence is sensed through the (dialogical) human community.

According to Kenner, _**EC IV**_ points to the “redeeming son.” Again, the speaker perceives the Son’s relationship to a community: “Beneath the bleeding hands we feel/ The sharp compassion of the healer’s art.” The use of the first person plural is crucial. The first line of each succeeding stanza (except for one) introduces an aspect of the relationship between the Son and the community of believers: “Our only health...Our hospital...The dripping blood our only drink.” The grammatical form neither assumes
objective knowledge nor despairs over subjective solipsism. It embodies a posture of encounter.

*DS IV* addresses the “the Virgin,” asking her to “Pray for all those who are in ships...Repeat a prayer also on behalf of/ Women who have seen their sons or husbands/ Setting forth, and not returning...Also pray for those who were in ships.” This lyric does not incorporate the first person singular, but still places the divine presence in relation to various communities. Rather than speaking about the Virgin the speakers’ address her directly.

Finally, *LG IV* points to the “Holy Ghost.” The lyric begins in an impersonal and tight structure that describes the activity of the third person of the Trinity, but by the end of the second stanza moves once again to the first person singular: “...Which human power cannot remove./ We only live, only suspire/ Consumed by either fire or fire.” Each lyric includes an “objective” aspect of the activity of a divine person. The fact of death (the result of sin) in *BN IV*; the Son’s gift of life through his own death in *EC IV*; the Virgin’s prayer for the weak in *DS IV*; and the Holy Spirit’s means of sanctification in *LG IV*. But these objective activities are always seen through the divine persons’ relationship to a human community.

The encounter in each quartet’s fourth sections resembles Buber’s “encounter.” For Buber, every human relationship implies a relationship with the divine: “one cannot follow the logos more adequately than by saying ‘We’” (Knowledge 96). “Logos” becomes the grounds for communication in general, both between humans and the divine and between humans and other humans: “when we know and think in accordance with
the logos, we do so not in isolation but in common” (Pointing 88). Dialogue presupposes the far more fundamental dialogue with the logos himself: “If our mouths succeed in genuinely saying ‘thou,’ then, after long silence and stammering, we shall have addressed our eternal ‘Thou’ anew. Reconciliation leads towards reconciliation” (229). Buber takes dialogism to the next (divine) level by casting his theology entirely in terms of a dialogical encounter with God. When FQ’s lyric sections employ the first person plural, then, it intuits a divine presence.

Given this vision of dialogism, it is no coincidence that FQ’s paradigmatic form of successful communication is prayer. Prayer demonstrates what FQ might imply is true of all communication: language always pre-supposes and necessitates that which is “common to all.” FQ emphasizes the sufficiency of dialogical knowledge of the other, and holds up prayer as its paradigmatic form. We return, then, to the only explicit dialogue in the entire poem, and recognize why it provides such a fitting climax for the poem as a whole. Words suffice not for denoting but for encountering: “the words sufficed/ To compel the recognition they proceeded.” The speaker cannot provide a static, external or “objective” description of his dialogue partner: “I caught the sudden look of some dead master/ Whom I had known, forgotten, half recalled/ Both one and many...Both intimate and unidentifiable.” The speaker must employ paradox to describe the “dead master.” The lines suggest that both speakers are in the process of becoming as

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18 The speaker in EC V likewise sees human communion at the heart of reality: “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.”

19 Williams articulates the correlation within a theological framework: "Christian theology celebrates a divine stranger who creates a common world" (Williams 114).

20 Buber also notices the correlation between dialogue and prayer: “the fact that it is so difficult for present–day man to pray (note well: not to hold it to be true that there is a God, but to address Him) and the fact that it is so difficult for him to carry on a genuine talk with his fellow – men are elements of a single set of facts” (Pointing 238).
they dialogue: “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 proceeded.” Like Bakhtin and Buber, then, *FQ* places the dialogical encounter at the heart of its hope for salvation.

*FQ* does not contain other explicit prayers, but speakers frequently allude to this form of communication. *DS II* associates prayer with a “pattern.” The first part of the section juxtaposes the “soundless wailing” with the prayer of “the unprayable/ Prayer at the calamitous annunciation.”21 The section then describes the “failing/Pride” and “wastage” that comes through “silent wailing,” a form of communication that does not depend upon prayer. The only “answer” to this problem is the “barely prayable/ Prayer of the one Annunciation. It seems, as one becomes older,/ That the past has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere sequence.” Having laid out this connection the speaker then moves to an actual prayer in IV: “Lady....Pray for all those who are in ships...Repeat a prayer also on behalf of....Also pray for those who were in ships.” The speaker now prays to the Virgin Mary, and asks her to pray for others. Prayer for the dead becomes a viable means of communication after the annunciation. *DS* finally points to the intersection enabled by the Annunciation: “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 Incarnation provides a common ground in which for saints from different times and different “spheres of existence” (living or

21 The Annunciation is the event where the Virgin prayed: “Let it be done to me according to your word.” The divine Word of God then became incarnate in her womb. It is no coincidence that the poem associates prayer with the event whereby the eternal logos is made human, and thereby establishes an “intersection point” between divinity and humanity, eternity and temporality.
dead) to communicate: "Thus to be in the Body of Christ now is to be a 'place' in which Christ offers his prayer to the Father" (Williams 96). Incarnation brings diverse “spheres of existence” together without merging them into one new essence. Finally, then, “All manner of thing shall be well/ By the purification of the motive/ In the ground of our beseeching.” The poem’s promise of peace is based on “the ground of our beseeching,” the grounds on which to establish a dialogical community.

**Responsibility**

While *TWL* places its hope for “peace” in the revelation of a divine voice, *FQ* finds the word that is “common to all” sufficient for establishing communion between speakers. *FQ* revises *TWL* not by returning to pre-exilic “one language,” but by moving forward through Pentecost: “It is a linguistic move that once again accompanies a major existential move....For if the Spirit comes at Pentecost as a beginning and a pledge of the future transformation of the world, his sign is the miraculous transformation, very pointedly, of the apostles’ speech” (Edwards 12). Rather than imagining peace as “one language,” *FQ* imagines peace as the communion that persists through any number of languages.

Readers are not excluded from the dialogue. *FQ* draws readers into its dialogue more explicitly than does *TWL*. The speaker in *BN* I directly addresses the readers: “Other echoes/ Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?...Through the gate/ Into our first world.” The speaker employs the first person plural to include the reader. The man of letters addresses the reader even more bluntly in *EC* III: “You say I am repeating/ Something I have said before. I shall say it again./ Shall I say it again?” The only time in *TWL* when the reader is explicitly addressed is in the last section, the section that gestures
towards a divine voice: “We who were living are now dying...Who is the third who walks always beside you?/ When I count, there are only you and I together.” *TWL* relies on the possibility of an immediate divine sound to establish the possibility of dialogue. Yet at the very end speakers dialogue (briefly) with a divine voice, not other human speakers. By contrast, *FQ* assumes dialogue with the reader throughout.

Perhaps *FQ*’s faith in a “real [divine] presence” prompts it to wager not only on transcendence (Steiner’s definition for “real presence”) but on the possibility of dialogue. According to Stephen Kepnes, Buber similarly comes to such a wager: "This 'wager' is the faith in a 'common logos,' a logos 'which does not attain its fullness in us but rather between us.' This common logos is not a common language of reason but a communicative space" (Kepnes 148). *FQ*, a poem situated “between” worlds, perhaps finds its value in the space between itself and the reader. Kenner argues that *FQ*’s success lies in its ability to create music through its various speech genres rather than uphold itself as the complete thought of one man. He recognizes its genius as its creation of “a communicative space:”

The *Quartets* muse, they traverse and exploit a diversity of timbres and intonations, interchange themes, set going a repetitive but developing minute of motifs. The *Waste Land* is by comparison a piece of eloquence. Like the voices of a string quartet, the lyric, didactic, colloquial, and deliberative modes of the poems pursue in an enclosed world the forms of intent conversation...We are not addressed, we overhear. (Kenner 305)

Kenner’s reading challenges Beasely’s (and others’) for whom *FQ* “move[s] away from the ideologically open texts of The Waste Land...to a more didactic form of poetry: rather
than analyzing the contemporary situation, this poetry aims to provide answers” (Beasley
113). Kenner argues instead that $FQ$’s various forms and voices create a linguistic
landscape closer to that of conversation than definition. Yet for Kenner readers only
overhear the conversation. If my argument is valid $FQ$ constitutes a presence to which
readers must respond because they have been addressed.

While all aesthetic works constitute such a presence, according to Steiner, $FQ$
appears self-conscious of this dynamic. Rather than presenting readers with a series of
dogmas or a unifying principle, or even the poetic strategy for a divine figure, $FQ$’s
poetics disciplines readers, addresses them, and finally invites them into an encounter
with the Other. In Real Presences, Steiner argues that readings that emphasis the head
(notion) or the heart (experience) will produce “different forms of meanings” (Presences
149). An encounter with the Other, however, integrates both “forms of meaning.” Steiner
terms this integration “immediacy.” The reader who encounters such immediacy is
responsible to respond with “Tact of heart,” not only conceptualizing or feeling the
presence but actively responding to it. Steiner’s theory of answerability to aesthetic
works resembles Buber’s response to the Other:

The written word (for Buber, the poem) is never satisfied to remain as a
monument to a past dialogue. It, in itself, calls out for dialogue, for a
continuance of the conversation which the poem presents and extends over time.
The poem itself is nothing other than a call to the other, a call to the Thou. 'The
poem is spokenness, spokenness to the Thou' - it calls out for renewal of
dialogue. (Kepnes 68)
FQ is keenly aware of the ethical and epistemological aspects of dialogue. The process of reading FQ – replete with its poetics of renunciation, constant displacements, polyphony and address to readers - not only invites but also enables readers to “renew dialogue.”

**Conclusion**

Many critics argue that “Eliot is suspected of having given in to the temptation: falling back on old mythologies to avoid the terror of the abyss” (Modernism 330). However, FQ does not retreat from the abyss of “linguistic pluralism” to a single unifying principle. Instead, it proceeds past the need for a “semantic center” and enters the linguistic landscape of dialogical mediation. What Kepnes says of Buber can be said of Eliot’s FQ: "life lived in the middle is life lived in contact with and dependent on others. Life transpires in the 'between,' between beginning and end, between birth and death...Here, we are to find our eternity. Here, in the 'eternal middle' and not in the end, we are to find our way" (Kepnes 68). FQ is intimately concerned with the life “between” now and History, the living and the dead, the human and the divine, the reader and the poem. The paradigmatic place of betweeness is Incarnation itself, the *logos* “common to all.” Whereas the “knock upon the door” in TWL led to the Sybil’s abysmal desire to die, FQ challenges readers to take up its wager in the “logos common to all.” For “without the gamble on welcome, no door can be opened when freedom knocks” (Presence156).
Conclusion

Critics of all stripes typically read Eliot’s poetic vocation as divided into two phases by an epistemological and spiritual crisis. Critics writing about *TWL* generally agree that close to the heart of the poem lies its fragmented “voice-collage.” However, they disagree over the meaning and nature of this collage. Charles Pollard, Franco Moretti and Harriet Davidson discern a movement towards liberation from dominating forms. For Moretti, freedom comes in the form of “polyphony”; for Pollard, of “a colloquial idiom”; for Davidson, a “hermeneutic universe.” On the other side of the spectrum are Ruth Nevo and Graham Hugh who read in its fragments *TWL*’s desire to establish a new form of unity: “In poetry of this kind the larger unities are not visible on the surface or present in any readily analyzable structure. They are given by a slow underground process of psychic development, often only discernable in retrospect” (*Modernism* 320).

My own reading of *TWL* suggests that critical disagreement testifies to the crisis internal to *TWL* itself. *TWL* lives out Gunton’s thesis concerning modernity: “the assertion of the rights of the many has paradoxically, dialectically perhaps, achieved the opposite, the subversion of the many by new and in some cases demonic versions of the one” (Gunton 33). The poem swings from radical “linguistic pluralism” and polyphony to radical unity bordering on monism. Yet the poem cannot establish a middle ground, and as a result its personae fail to establish a dialogical community.

Criticism on *FQ* is divided too, though perhaps less sharply. Pollard, Beasley and Bradbury and McFarlane recognize in its homogenous form Eliot’s post-conversion
return to a centralized system of dogmatic beliefs and desire to institutionalize them in order to recover cultural order. Kenner, Atkins and Moody discern in *FQ* an irreducible dialect between “severalness and singularity” (Moody 142). I argue that rather than placing hope in a divine voice or immediate word, *FQ* displaces personae and readers to prepare them for an encounter with the Other through dialogical mediation.

Re-reading Eliot’s two long poems in conjunction with each other suggests a different reading of his poetic vocation as a whole. While several critics read *TWL* and *FQ* as expressing utterly different poetic techniques, if not ideologies, I have argued that in significant ways both poems deal with a dialectic at the heart of language, between absence and presence, plenitude and vacancy. I pick up where Pollard leaves off. Only in his conclusion does he point beyond *TWL*’s “ventriloquism” and *FQ*’s “purification” to the “rich possibilities for poetry to represent both the reality of linguistic fragmentation and the dream of a common language. Poetry is perhaps best suited to fulfill this task because its figurative complexity and linguistic sensitivity better register these contradictory realities of language” (Pollard 138). Many critics effectively argue that *TWL* moves towards “linguistic fragmentation” and *FQ* towards “the dream of a common language.” I claim that both poems sense the tension throughout.

For De Man ambivalence lies at the heart of literature itself: “here, the consciousness does not result from the absence of something, but consists of the presence of nothingness. Poetic language names this void with ever-renewed understanding...This persistent naming is what we call literature” (*Blindness* 18). I have attempted to give credence to Paul de Man’s insight – as it is embodied in Eliot’s poetry – while also maintaining Steiner’s concern with the presence/absence dialect. My reading contributes
not only to the current conception of Eliot’s development, but also suggests a more
general relation between all poetic language (replete with metaphor, figuration,
repetition, rhyme scheme and other techniques) and the ways in which it intuits “real
absence” and “real presence.”

Although both poems admit the ambivalence, I have been perhaps especially
cconcerned with demonstrating its presence (or absence!) in *FQ*, since the poem is so
frequently considered to be Eliot’s “purification project.” Christian Wiman argues that
*FQ* achieves a perfect balance between both: “[M]odern consciousness is marked by
nothing so much as consciousness of death. Can one believe in Christ and death in equal
measure? Is this degree of negative capability possible?...I can’t think of any English-
language poets after Eliot who have achieved this (or even tried)” (Wiman 162). Reading
both poems in relation to each other, then, might advance an insight accepted about
poetry in general, but sometimes de-emphasized in relation to *FQ*.

Finally, I have tried to show that Eliot may be added to the long list of
modern[ist] thinkers who place their hope for peace in dialogue. Bakhtin, Huessy and
Buber (to name a few) each respond to historical crises caused by a society that over-
emphasizes “the one” or “the many” by attempting to establish grounds for “reception”
and “responsibility:” in short, for dialogue.

My reading cannot account for each poem’s intricacies, but risks knocking on
their doors nonetheless, in hopes that they will knock back. Perhaps this “readerly
activity” is most fitting given Eliot’s life-long hope for an “easy commerce of the old and
new,” and enables readers to “fare-forward” in a culture of “epilogue”: “Our encounter
with the freedom of presence in another human being, our attempts to communicate with
that freedom, will always entail approximation...The congruence is never complete...The falling-short is a guarantor of the experienced ‘otherness’ the freedom to be or not to be, to enter into or abstain from a commerce of spirit with us” (Presences 175).
“The rest is silence.”
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