

THE AFFIRMATION OF LIFE IN WALLACE STEVENS' "THE AURORAS OF
AUTUMN" AND TS ELIOT'S *FOUR QUARTETS*

BY

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Abstract

My thesis traces the affirmation of life evident in Wallace Stevens' "The Auroras of Autumn" and T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, defining the term affirmation by the expansive embrace of suffering demonstrated by Alyosha Karamazov in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. I maintain that, similar to Alyosha, Stevens affirms life by acknowledging the inevitability of change, established by the ceaseless passage of time, and by celebrating human existence while recognizing the paradoxical positive and negative effects suffering exerts on individuals. Also, similar to Alyosha's affirmation, in *Four Quartets*, Eliot frequently concentrates on the inevitability and instrumentality of suffering—its unique power to shape an individual's character into someone who "fructifies in the lives of others." Thus, he too maintains the same foundation of unconditional embrace and joy. In *Four Quartets*, I contend that Eliot affirms life by proclaiming that individuals must be fully engrossed, including mind and body, in the immediacy of each successive moment, regardless of whatever potential threats it may pose. Additionally, in each chapter, I explore in greater detail the various elements that each poet identifies as detracting from humanity's ability to affirm life. In short, Stevens faults the pressure of news and excessive reliance on history for obscuring the fundamental innocence of existence, and the constant transformation it experiences. For Stevens, if humanity recognized this innocence and inexorable change, they would insert themselves into the natural process of affirmation embodied by the earth; they would constantly seek new experiences and revitalizing resemblances. For Eliot, the fear and anxiety of living in the present—of not knowing the future—blocks affirmation.

Introduction

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the character of Alyosha does not allow the pervasiveness and anguish of suffering to prevent him from seeking new experiences and entering volatile situations. He affirms life; he embraces all of it—from the heights of joy to the depths of pain—believing that the inevitability of suffering must not preclude humanity from celebrating beauty and attending to the particulars of each passing moment. Fyodor Dostoevsky demonstrates this by contextualizing Alyosha's ultimate affirmation amidst the loss of his beloved mentor, Father Zosima. Alyosha grieves for his mentor. However, he does not allow his grief, his suffering, to nullify the joy that is simultaneously evident in the world, derived from the physical beauty of the earth and, more importantly, the intimacy of human connection. While sitting in the sanctuary of his monastery, where the body of his mentor lies, listening to a fellow monk, Father Paisy, read from the wedding at Cana passage in the Gospel of John, Alyosha declares to himself: "Ah yes, I've been missing it and I didn't want to miss it, I love that passage: it's Cana of Galilee, the first miracle...Ah, that miracle, ah, that lovely miracle! Not grief, but men's joy Christ visited when he worked his first miracle, he helped men's joy... 'He who loves men, loves their joy.'"¹ Jesus' actions in Cana energize and sustain Alyosha. Mainstream Christian theology maintains that Jesus' sacrifice atones for the sins of the world. His violent death pardons the unfathomable depth of human sin. Nevertheless, despite the immeasurable significance of his impending mission, at the wedding feast, Jesus declares that it is not His time yet—before His passion, he implies that one of His

¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002. 360. All further citations will be made in text with the abbreviation *TBK*.

primary purposes is to magnify human joy. His miracle of turning water into wine symbolizes the deepening of joy in the context of human connection and flourishing. Thus, while recognizing the inevitability of suffering, represented by both Zosima's death and Jesus' eventual sacrifice, Alyosha also recognizes that one must refuse to allow pain to detract from the happiness possible in human life—anguish must not eradicate joy. As Zosima reminds him in a vision, Christ “became like us out of love” (361).

Alyosha translates pain into a constructive experience. While grieving for his mentor, heartbroken over the loss. Alyosha strides to the coffin, then bolts outside where his dead mentor's words return to him:

The silence of the earth seemed to merge with the silence of the heavens, the mystery of the earth touched the mystery of the stars...Alyosha stood gazing and suddenly, as if he had been cut down, threw himself to the earth. He did not know why he was embracing it, he did not try to understand why he longed so irresistibly to kiss it, to kiss all of it, but he was kissing it, weeping, sobbing, and watering it with his tears, and he vowed ecstatically to love it, to love it unto ages of ages. “Water the earth with the tears of your joy, and love those tears,”...rang in his soul.

He must throw himself headfirst into the world, deliberately putting himself into contexts in which he will certainly encounter suffering, and in which he will ceaselessly need to forgive “for all and for everything,” including himself. Indeed, his final decision to affirm the goodness of life culminates in the fulfillment of his mentor's charge to “sojourn in the world;” his affirmation pushes him into interaction with anyone and everyone, from the kind and thoughtful to the cruel and selfish. However, Alyosha endeavors to take this affirmation further, into the realm of joy: he must “love those tears.” Zosima charges him not only to engage with the surrounding world, but also to love this engagement, to love even the pain and emotional extremes it brings. Since

suffering is inevitable, one must be able to confront and experience it in order for one's sojourn to reach its fullest potential, to engage with as much of life as possible, with as many people as possible. Alyosha's affirmation of life is defined by his unrelenting embrace of the entire world based on his decision to acknowledge the acute pain of suffering, but also the potential it offers for the strengthening of one's character, for the cultivation of personal contentment, and for the development of intimacy by creating community.

Poets Wallace Stevens and T.S. Eliot both make this Alyoshaan affirmation; however, they arrive there via two distinct paths and they emphasize different elements of it. My thesis traces the affirmation of life evident in Stevens' "The Auroras of Autumn" and Eliot's *Four Quartets*, defining the term by Alyosha's expansive embrace. I maintain that, similar to Alyosha, Stevens affirms life by acknowledging the inevitability of change, established by the ceaseless passage of time, and by celebrating human existence while recognizing the paradoxical positive and negative effects suffering exerts on individuals. However, while Stevens gestures toward the need for interpersonal intimacy, his affirmation emphasizes individual creativity and imagination as the path that leads to an individual's ability to confront and accept suffering and engage with the world. Furthermore, Stevens indicates that this inexorable change inspires the ceaseless renewal of one's imaginative engagement with the bare rock of reality. Also, similar to Alyosha's affirmation, in *Four Quartets*, Eliot frequently concentrates on the inevitability and instrumentality of suffering—its unique power to shape an individual's character into someone who "fructifies in the lives of others."² Thus, he too maintains the same

² T.S. Eliot. *Collected Poems: 1909-1962*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc, 1963. 197. Henceforth all citations of this book will be in-text parenthetical with the acronym *CP*.

foundation of unconditional embrace and joy. However, he also emphasizes a different element than Dostoevsky's character. Alyosha's affirmation is less hurried; by employing the language of embarking upon a permanent mission, the reader knows that his embrace of the world will unfold over the course of his lifetime. In contrast, Eliot pays much greater attention to the urgency of each moment. However, Eliot's affirmation resembles Alyosha's more closely than Stevens'. In *Four Quartets*, I contend that Eliot affirms life by proclaiming that individuals must be fully engrossed, including mind and body, in the immediacy of each successive moment, regardless of whatever potential threats it may pose. Additionally, in each chapter, I explore in greater detail the various elements that each poet identifies as detracting from humanity's ability to affirm life. In short, Stevens faults the pressure of news and excessive reliance on history for obscuring the fundamental innocence of existence, and the constant transformation it experiences. For Stevens, if humanity recognized this innocence and inexorable change, they would insert themselves into the natural process of affirmation embodied by the earth; they would constantly seek new experiences and revitalizing resemblances. For Eliot, the fear and anxiety of living in the present—of not knowing the future—blocks affirmation.

Before turning to my close reading of "The Auroras of Autumn" and *Four Quartets*, I would like to address one question in the hope that the answer provides a type of sanction for my project: how can one consider these poets affirmative—poets who suggest that humanity needs to cultivate new ways of interpreting the world in order to find contentment and meaning—supreme fictions, as Stevens calls them? The question could also be rephrased: does the implication that humanity needs a *fiction* or an

additional interpretive key, ironically, prove the very opposite of what I contend about the affirmative quality of Stevens' and Eliot's poetry? I hope to show that this question assumes that a pure reality, untainted by perception and interpretation, exists. Stevens' fictions and Eliot's mystical approach rest on the belief that any viewpoint, even a limited, stultifying one that relies too heavily on tradition or indulges in the distractions of society, is a type of fiction or interpretive method.

Instead of suggesting that a universal reality exists, Stevens claims that reality and the imagination are entwined with each other:

[The possible poet] must be able to abstract himself and also to abstract reality, which he does by placing it in his imagination...Don Quixote will make it imperative for him to make a choice, to come to a decision regarding the imagination and reality; and he will find that it is not a choice of one over the other and not a decision that divides them, but something subtler, a recognition that here, too, as between these poles, the universal interdependence exists, and hence his choice and his decision must be that they are equal and inseparable. (NA 24)

If the imagination and reality are fundamentally entwined, then human beings unavoidably apply their creative and interpretive faculty to the objects of perception, ensuring that all interpretations of one's life—every lens through which individuals understand and categorize their world—are fictions. Analyzing Stevens' poetry, Helen Vendler remarks: "Anyone who singles out, by desire, some one man or woman as a singular valued object, creates by that act a fiction, an idealized image in which desire finds, or thinks to find, its satisfaction."³ In "Auroras," Stevens explores this creative and destructive function of the mind. Critic Joseph Riddel claims that one of the abiding purposes of "Auroras" is to observe "the activity of mind as it creates and dissolves

³ Helen Vendler. *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984. 29.

(decreates) ideas or forms, creating others in the same process. This was the life of the mind, the “never-ending meditation” (CP 465), and he came to accept it, for better or worse, as what men of imagination do every instant, as well as in formal poems.”⁴

Consequently, for Stevens, the “pressure of reality,” which detracts from the recognition that humanity must interpret reality on such a complex, subjective level, becomes increasingly dangerous. He defines the pressure of reality as “the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation.”⁵ Human society presents obstacles that prevent the mind from recognizing the need for creative engagement with the surrounding world. For Stevens, the modern world starves the human imagination. Thus, this pressure only increases the value of the poet’s work. Stevens proclaims:

There is, in fact, a world of poetry indistinguishable from the world in which we live, or, I ought to say, no doubt, from the world in which we shall come to live, since what makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it. (NA 31)

For Stevens, fictions constitute an organizing principle, or a lens through which one makes sense of one’s surroundings. Fictions help an individual develop a type of malleable foundation from which he or she can engage confidently with the world.

Furthermore, Stevens believes that poetry itself exists as a logical outworking of the imagination and reality, which combine to generate newly credible fictions, thereby exposing a fundamental affirmation of life. Stevens writes:

⁴ Joseph Riddel. *Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965. 228-229.

⁵ Wallace Stevens. *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*. New York: Vintage Books, 1951. 20. Henceforth, all references to *The Necessary Angel* will be parenthetically cited with the abbreviation NA.

We have been trying to get at a truth about poetry, to get at one of the principles that compose the theory of poetry. It comes to this, that poetry is a part of the structure of reality. If this has been demonstrated, it pretty much amounts to saying that the structure of poetry and the structure of reality are one or, in effect, that poetry and reality are one. (NA 80-81)

Consequently, no one can avoid living by a fiction. Additionally, just as Stevens claims that all life is subsumed into different fictions, in “Esthetique du Mal,” he claims that the desire for affirmation undergirds every action: “The mortal no / Has its emptiness and tragic extirpations. / The tragedy, however, may have begun, / Again in the imagination’s new beginning, / In the yes of the realist spoken because he must / Say yes, spoken because under every no / Lay a passion for yes that had never been broken.”⁶ Stevens indicates that spoken language contains a fundamental affirmation without the speaker making a conscious effort in this regard. In other words, far from simply distracting or misleading society away from a universal truth, everything is a fiction resting on an affirmation regardless of our consciousness of this reality. Thus, humanity certainly can affirm: deliberately deciding to create affirmative fictions connects people to the very structure of reality, enabling them to successfully evade its inhibiting “pressure.” For Stevens, the only choice presented to individuals is between a stagnant, constricting fiction or one that links to the heart of reality and bestows contentment.

In his earlier career, Eliot sought “a release from emotion:” “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.”⁷ Accordingly, Eliot emphasizes poetry’s fundamentally personal and contextual nature in order to indicate the inscrutability of the

⁶ Wallace Stevens. *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 1957. 320. All subsequent quotes will be cited parenthetically with the abbreviation CP.

⁷ T.S. Eliot. “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1960. 58.

experiences it renders. In doing so, he shows that his affirmation, the philosophy that he suggests offers a life of intimacy and contentment, rests on his belief in the indeterminacy at the center of human existence. Poetry, for Eliot, reflects the society from which it originates: “The uses of poetry certainly vary as society alters, as the public to be addressed changes.”⁸ However, Eliot, like Stevens, believes that poetry has no specific social obligation. He claims: “But it seems to me probable that if poetry—and I mean *all* great poetry—has had no social function in the past, it is not likely to have any in the future.”⁹ Instead, the poet offers consistently new, stimulating ways of experiencing and comprehending one’s surrounding world:

But he is not merely a more conscious person than the others; he is also individually different from other people, and from other poets too, and can make his readers share consciously in new feelings which they had not experienced before. That is the difference between the writer who is merely eccentric or made and the genuine poet. The former may have feelings which are unique but which cannot be shared, and are therefore useless; the latter discovers new variations of sensibility which can be appropriated by others. (*OPP* 10)

Nonetheless, poetry may express emotions common across generations and cultures: “No two readers, perhaps, will go to poetry with quite the same demands. Amongst all these demands from poetry and responses to it there is always some permanent element in common, just as there are standards of good and bad writing” (*UPUC* 141). However, it cannot correspond to a specific, “correct” perception of reality: “but every effort to formulate the common element is limited by the limitations of particular men in particular places and at particular times; and those limitations become manifest in the

⁸ T.S. Eliot. *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England*. Boston: Faber and Faber, 1980. 150. All subsequent quotes will be cited parenthetically with the abbreviation *UPUC*.

⁹ T.S. Eliot. *On Poetry and Poets*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009. 3. All subsequent quotes will be cited parenthetically with the abbreviation *OPP*.

perspective of history” (*UPUC* 142). As a committed Christian, Eliot believes that the Incarnation of Jesus constitutes God’s ultimate revelation. However, even on this point, within *Four Quartets*, he recognizes the profound wisdom many religions espouse. In “The Dry Salvages,” when discussing the potential for character development that human agony extends—“the bitter apple and the bite in the apple (*CP* 195)”—Eliot goes on to give the lines to Krishna, saying, “I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant— / Among other things—or one way of putting the same thing” (*CP* 195). Further down in “The Dry Salvages,” Eliot pronounces his most overtly Christian statement in the entirety of *Four Quartets*. Referring to the Incarnation of Christ, Eliot whispers: “The hint half guessed, the gift half understood is Incarnation” (*CP* 199). The use of the brief word “hint,” that conjures the image of lovers offering short sentiments, asking the counterpart to add his own imaginings in order to finish the moment, softens the tone of the lines, suggesting that Eliot does not want to overwhelm anyone with this idea. The presence of both religious references gestures toward the need to incorporate a variety of different perspectives to make a single point.

Poetry itself is an imprecise method of expressing unformulated emotions and experiences:

And what is the experience that the poet is so bursting to communicate? By the time it has settled down into a poem it may be so different from the original experience as to be hardly recognizable. The ‘experience’ in question may be the result of a fusion of feelings so numerous, and ultimately so obscure in their origins, that even if there be communication of them, the poet may hardly be aware of what he is communicating; and what is there to be communicated was not in existence before the poem was completed. (*UPUC* 138)

Instead of describing one, fixed reality, Eliot posits that poetry enables a refreshed vision of one's particular context, saying:

It may effect revolutions in sensibility such as are periodically needed; may help to break up the conventional modes of perception and valuation which are perpetually forming, and make people see the world afresh, or some new part of it. It may make us from time to time a little more aware of the deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate; for our lives are mostly a constant evasion of ourselves, and an evasion of the visible and sensible world. But to say all this is only to say what you know already, if you have felt poetry and thought about your feelings. (UPUC 155)

One sees this playing out in Eliot's poetry. The fact that Eliot offers a vision of affirmation that emphasizes the body and the necessity of being "intent" in every moment does not constitute the evasion of a volatile, depraved reality. On the contrary, like Zosima, who charges Alyosha to sojourn in the world, Eliot admonishes the reader to return to the immediacy of every moment, and to dwell there in an embodied way. For Eliot, as for Stevens, there exists no implacable, universal reality that the poet must adopt permanently, and Eliot certainly accounts for the reality of pain. His affirmation accommodates the fullest extent of human life, including both delight and suffering within the lines of *Four Quartets*. Thus, no one escapes: everyone either affirms or rejects the world—even if they fail to realize it. Stevens' and Eliot's poetry articulates ways to affirm existence not in an attempt to enable people to escape reality, but in an attempt to facilitate a deeper, constructive, joyful means of entering it more fully.

Stevensian scholarship dealing with the poet's affirmation of life focuses on the means by which the constancy of change, which for Stevens inherently influences the life of every living thing on earth, reveals desire, which inspires his constant, renewed re-engagement with reality. For Stevens, the imagination constitutes the means by which

one enacts such participation. In “Stevens’s Poetry of Affirmation,” critic Steven Shaviro claims: “Stevens is a poet less of meanings and presences, and their concomitant dearths and absences, than of desire as metamorphosis, the asubjective “will to change” and its noncoincident productions-alterations.”¹⁰

Concerning Eliot scholarship, professor Barbara Newman, in “Eliot’s Affirmative Way: Julian of Norwich, Charles Williams, and *Little Gidding*,” discusses the intertextual connection with Julian, whose proverb “and all shall be well” constitutes the most direct statement of affirmation in *Four Quartets*. Newman rightly identifies that Julian, while articulating a different theological perspective, offers “the assurance of a Christian hope not merely willed but profoundly felt, at the highest level of abstraction he preferred.”¹¹ Additionally, Newman reminds the reader of the wartime context of *Four Quartets*, suggesting that it is “positioned uneasily between “the infirm glory of the positive hour” (*Ash Wednesday* I) and the ever-present reality of destruction.” Thus, Newman contends that Eliot’s *Four Quartets* speaks words of affirming comfort that include both intention and experience to a public audience during crisis. Additionally, in “Desire and Love in *Four Quartets*,” author Genevieve Stevens indicates the concept of desire. The engrossed desire of Stevens’ poetry is present in Eliot’s: “The conscious movement of desire is thus transformed into an unconscious state of being. Waiting, which implies “waiting for,” is isolated and separated from its teleological associations. Desire becomes movement devoid of a known destination.”¹² Consequently, as Genevieve

¹⁰ Steven Shaviro. “That Which is Always Beginning,: Stevens’s Poetry of Affirmation.” *PMLA*, Vol. 100, No. 2 (Mar., 1985): 220-233. 226.

¹¹ Barbara Newman. “Eliot’s Affirmative Way: Julian of Norwich, Charles Williams, and *Little Gidding*,” *Modern Philology*, Vol. 108, No. 3 (February 2011): pp. 427-461. 460.

¹² Genevieve Stevens. “Desire and Love in *Four Quartets*.” *Irish Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 13/14, (2004/2005): 205-225. 208.

Stevens suggests, the way of affirmation in *Four Quartets* exists within a teleological narrative but paradoxically also independent of it, instead flourishing in the immediacy of each passing moment.

My thesis is a close reading of these complicated poems. In my first chapter, I will focus on tracing the affirmation of life, through Stevens' concepts of change and desire evident in "The Auroras of Autumn." I examine "Auroras" sequentially, canto by canto, using Shaviro, J. Hillis Miller, Joseph Riddel and others as interlocutors. For Stevens, death constitutes an essential part of all life. Accordingly, "Auroras" evinces the need to shift metaphors for describing reality in an effort to replicate the natural, inherent cycle of birth, life, and death that all living things follow. Every metaphor and image Stevens uses eventually succumbs to its inevitable death. In doing so, it allows new metaphors to replenish each moment, revealing his affirmation: humanity should embrace the innocence of existence, free from any divine decree, and the resulting capacity for effortless and rapid transformation—"It is of cloud transformed / To cloud transformed again, idly, the way / A season changes color to no end" (*PM* 312)—all of which exposes the centrality of desire.

In my second chapter, I will examine Eliot's affirmation of life in *Four Quartets*. I plan to assign equal value to each of the *Quartets*, examining each sequentially. Like my chapter on Stevens, I engage Eliot's magisterial long poem as a close reading, primarily using Harry Blamires' *Word Unheard*, Donoghue's *Words Alone*, and Keith Alldritt's *Eliot's Four Quartets: Poetry as Chamber Music* to explicate the text. I also treat the musical form Eliot employs for his last major poem, suggesting that it establishes a fundamental inconclusiveness: there can never be a final word on the

various themes contained within the poem. Eliot loads all of these themes into the immediacy of each successive moment, ruminating on the attempt to avoid the pain and anxiety that results from being attuned to them. I contend that Eliot emphasizes the need to be aware of the body, mind, and soul, as well as one's personal history, in each moment showing that an individual must continually re-enter each new moment in order to properly confront the reality of suffering, and fully affirm life. Eliot, who wrote much of *Four Quartets* during World War II, was concerned to affirm that life was valuable even amidst violence and constant loss. Each moment contains a new beginning, some "new and shocking / Valuation of all we have been." Eliot's affirmation arises from this belief.

Chapter One

Change and Desire: the Affirmation of Life in Wallace Stevens' "The Auroras of Autumn"

In "The Auroras of Autumn," Wallace Stevens articulates the means by which humanity can live a contented life without reference to a religious narrative that only sanctions happiness after a specific moral code and teleological vision purifies it. Accordingly, Stevens attempts, in "Auroras," to describe the world as innocent, as free from notions such as the Christian doctrine of human depravity, which declares that all human beings, indeed the entire earth, begin life in a state of moral and spiritual abjection. Instead, Stevens claims that everything in existence begins as neither righteous nor evil, but in a condition of innocence which, for Stevens, does not equal the absence of pain or death. Despite this intrinsic nature, in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," Stevens identifies an obstructing agent that inhibits the recognition of this natural innocence. Stevens claims that the "the pressure of reality," defined as the anxiety resulting from two world wars and the onslaught of news, "stir[s] the emotions to violence [and] engage[s] us in what is direct and immediate and real."¹³ Stevens fears that this sustained focus on "the immediate and real" will cause humanity's faculty of imagination—which, for Stevens, is the only force capable of revitalizing society—to atrophy: "The resistance to this pressure or its evasion in the case of individuals of extraordinary imagination cancels the pressure so far as those individuals are concerned" (NA 23). The imagination eliminates this pressure by preventing people from being

¹³ Stevens, *Necessary Angel*, 22.

driven into complacency by the uniformity and the abundance of news. Imagination enables people to perceive their circumstances with renewed vigor.

As demonstrated in his long, late poem, “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” Stevens claims that imagination and desire transform the pressure of reality into something lighter, more manageable: “The hibernal dark that hung / In primavera, the shadow of bare rock, // Becomes the rock of autumn, glittering, / Ponderable source of each imponderable, / The weight we lift with the finger of a dream, // The heaviness we lighten by light will, / By the hand of desire.”¹⁴ The poet imputes this relief through poetry; the poet’s imaginative capacity revives that of the reader. He thereby enables the reader to perceive his circumstances with refreshed perception. Stevens claims that the poet’s function in society “is to make his imagination theirs and that he fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others. His role, in short, is to help people live their lives” (NA 29).’’

The imagination accomplishes this lofty goal by generating new resemblances amongst the materials of reality. These resemblances refresh an individual’s perception of the world: “It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality” (NA 36). Stevens believes that human beings inherently live their lives enmeshed within a cycle of birth, life, and death—a cycle inaugurated by the turning of the earth, by the incessant passage of time. The steady march of time thereby absorbs all living entities into a cycle of constant change. Thus, Stevens’ poetry draws attention to the inescapability of change. Critic Steven Shaviro claims that “Stevens’ imagination functions as “universal “will to

¹⁴ Wallace Stevens. *The Palm at the End of the Mind*. New York, Vintage Books, 1990. 340-341. Henceforth, all references from this book will be cited parenthetically as *PM*.

change”...and as incessant rebeginning.” He continues, asserting that the inevitability of change reveals the centrality of desire for seeking new resemblances, claiming: “the process of imagination in Stevens’s poetry does not so much imitatively recreate as actively desire.”¹⁵ For Stevens, desire is a constantly renewable source of affirmation. While this affirmation may not include much discussion of character, it eventually resembles Alyosha Karamazov’s personal contentment and communal intimacy. I will examine “The Auroras of Autumn,” in order to illustrate the centrality of change and the role of desire within his affirmation. Ultimately, “The Auroras of Autumn” affirms life by illustrating the need to facilitate continually re-invigorating engagement with the world using the imagination to create a context of happiness and meaning.

Desire, for Stevens, propels the individual through life by enabling him to locate new resemblances between different objects. New resemblances bring pleasure by intensifying our sense of reality (*NA* 78). For Stevens, this is one of the primary functions of poetry. He claims:

[Poetry’s] singularity is that in the act of satisfying the desire for resemblance it touches the sense of reality, it enhances the sense of reality, heightens it, intensifies it. If resemblance is described as a partial similarity between two dissimilar things, it complements and reinforces that which the two dissimilar things have in common. It makes it brilliant (*NA* 77).

In order to make a resemblance “brilliant,” Stevens instructs the poet to “abstract” the objects of resemblance: “The point at which this process begins, or rather at which this growth begins, is the point at which ambiguity has been reached” (*NA* 79). Ambiguity, the effect of “abstraction,” loosens the object from its common linguistic denotations,

¹⁵ Steven Shaviro, “Stevens’s Poetry of Affirmation,” 222.

allowing it to participate with other objects in metaphorical interplay.¹⁶ Resemblances please the individual. In his essay “Three Academic Pieces,” Stevens uses Narcissus to illustrate this point: “Narcissism...involves something beyond the prime sense of the word. It involves, also, this principle, that as we seek out our resemblances we expect to find pleasure in doing so” (NA 80). Desire helps the individual remain vibrant and lively in the face of the “pressure of reality.” As Helen Vendler claims:

“The spirit without a foyer, by a series of happenings during the course of the poem, gains an absolute, if intermittent, foyer in desire and the words chosen out of desire....[W]e are reminded of the possibility of that journey in ourselves, of the recurrence of desire even in the absence of the romantic, even in the absence of a secure place, whether in the past or in the present, in this world.”¹⁷

Desire, for Stevens, enables the individual to consistently perceive his surroundings with new eyes, illuminating the tawdry, bare rock of reality.

In “The Auroras of Autumn,” Stevens demonstrates how the constancy of change reveals that innocent desire undergirds the decisions of all living entities and prevents the emergence of any fixed grid through which an individual can easily categorize experiences. Throughout the poem, every seemingly stable foundation eventually crumbles as a result of the relentlessness of change; Stevens challenges every object or vessel of emotional certainty. Thus, in the beginning of canto I, Stevens establishes a creation myth—one that will offer new foundations. The serpent encompasses the entirety of the cosmos: “This is where the serpent lives, the bodiless. / His head is air. Beneath his tip at night / Eyes open and fix on us in every sky” (PM 307). However, Stevens’ creation myth immediately subjects itself to the inevitable process of change.

¹⁶ J. Hillis Miller. *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers*. New York: Atheneum, 1969. 241.

¹⁷ Vendler, *Words Chosen Out of Desire*, 9.

Riddel suggests that Stevens' myth rightly begins in accordance with the natural, non-metaphysical nature of reality: "The serpent...is shorn of his Calvinism, and of his Platonism, and given back to us as the way things are, as pure temporality."¹⁸ Stevens injects uncertainty into the lines of the second stanza. However, this uncertainty does not call the reliability of the poet into question. Instead, it immediately acknowledges the need even for metaphors of creation to shift, evolve, transform: "Or is this another wriggling out of the egg, / Another image at the end of the cave, / Another bodiless for the body's slough?" Stevens heightens his emphasis on the necessity of change by his frequent use of the phrase "this is" and its various manifestations, such as "these hills," and "these tinted distances." Such a simple grammatical construction should indicate certainty. However, by repeating this phrase, thereby continually allowing new manifestations of it, he signals a de-centralization of certainty, the constant transformation and re-calibration of metaphors. However, Stevens then transforms the serpent, bringing it down from the cosmological to the more particular—at home in fields and hills instead of the sky: "This is where the serpent lives. This is his nest, / These fields, these hills, these tinted distances, / And the pines above and along and beside the sea." With this more specific manifestation of the serpent, Stevens calls the earth into being within his creation myth. However, he immediately subjects even this already transforming origin to the inherent need for change: "This is form gulping after formlessness." In this second manifestation, the Northern Lights appear for the first time in the poem. The Aurora Borealis is a beautiful, natural event generated simply by the tilting and spinning of the earth. Thus, these natural lights, that are generated by the turning of the earth, serve as the instrument that exposes a truth undergirding the entirety

¹⁸ Riddel, *Clairvoyant Eye*, 236.

of human existence: that all living things constantly change, yet they remain “Relentlessly in possession of happiness” (*PM* 307)—they remain innocently in pursuit of contentment, instead of attempting to deceive or corrupt their surroundings. By using the metaphor of the serpent to represent everything from the whole cosmos to a particular snake, Stevens applies this innocence to the entirety of existence.

Stevens, in canto I, asserts that the Aurora Borealis “finds the serpent” at the pole. The snake is already in his habitat—already searching for contentment. The serpent is naturally innocent, and naturally looking for a quiet moment of warm tranquility. Thus, after calling the earth into being, Stevens suggests that, in contrast to the biblical story of the Garden of Eden, in which a serpent confuses Adam and Eve, thereby ushering in human depravity, humanity is neither inherently evil or innately righteous, but innocent—creatures driven primarily by the desire to find contentment. Stevens also suggests that the search for happiness partially constitutes it: the serpent is “Relentlessly in possession of happiness.” His use of the word “relentless” indicates a tireless pursuit, yet to be “relentless” while simultaneously being “in possession” combines the pursuit with its desired result. The serpent ceaselessly seeks happiness and by this search, finds its constant renewal. Joseph Carroll remarks: “[Stevens’] primary motive in the main body of the poem will be to construct a visionary scheme within which the serpent can be “Relentlessly in possession of happiness.””¹⁹ Additionally, Stevens describes this serpent as “the master of the maze / Of body and air and forms and images.” Consequently, the entity who allows his desires for contentment to determine his actions is the “master;” he sets the example in Stevens’ creation myth that all subsequent creatures should try to

¹⁹ Joseph Carroll. *Wallace Stevens’ Supreme Fiction*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987. 239-240.

emulate. However, humanity rejects this: “This is his poison: that we should disbelieve / even that. His meditations in the ferns, / When he moved so slightly to make sure of sun, // Made us no less as sure” (*PM* 307). Instead, humanity clings to conventional interpretations of serpents, refusing to recognize the natural innocence of every living creature, preferring instead to uphold established understandings of the relationship between different entities within the universe. B.J. Leggett asserts: “The serpent’s poison is that we are unable to accept this traditional emblem of evil and death as an innocent ‘master of the maze.’ That is, we are unable to accept the principle of change as “Relentlessly in possession of happiness,” to accept the flux represented by the northern lights and the serpent as “An innocence of the earth.””²⁰ However, as the poem progresses, Stevens continually confronts individuals with this inherent innocence and directing desire in fresh ways as he changes metaphors constantly.

Stevens proceeds in canto II by elaborating on the beauty and liveliness the Northern Lights exude. Canto II begins with a wide, desolate beach. The reader can hear the empty space as “The wind is blowing sand across the floor.” The vacuity of the setting presses on the reader as Stevens describes the cabin’s appearance, including details of its history:

“A cabin stands,
Deserted, on a beach. It is white,
As by a custom or according to

An ancestral theme or as a consequence
Of an infinite course. The flowers against the wall
Are white, a little dried, a kind of mark

²⁰ B.J. Leggett. *Wallace Stevens and Poetic Theory: Conceiving the Supreme Fiction*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987. 175.

Reminding, trying to remind, of a white
That was different, something else, last year
Or before, not the white of an aging afternoon,

Whether fresher or duller, whether of winter cloud
Or of winter sky, from horizon to horizon. (*PM* 308)

Everything from the dull exterior to the impotent history conveys a sense of vacancy and emptiness. Stevens repeats the word “white” six times in canto II—and the word “whiteness” appears once. His use of repetition carves static firmness into the scene, as if the whiteness was “An ancestral theme or as a consequence / Of an infinite course” (*PM* 308). The words “ancestral,” “custom,” “remind,” “ageing,” and “extremist” bring the theme of complacency and convention more fully into the poem. In canto II, Stevens seeks to define the “ancestral theme” as static lifelessness. However, soon “The season changes. A cold wind chills the beach, / The long lines of it grow longer, emptier, / A darkness gathers though it does not fall // And the whiteness grows less vivid on the wall” (*PM* 308). The bright lights of the auroras prevent the darkness from obscuring the scene entirely. Instead, they illuminate the beach and elicit a remark: “He observes how the north is always enlarging the change.” The Auroras prevent the static lifelessness from eternally determining the family’s history. In contrast to the stultifying whiteness of the first five stanzas, after Stevens mentions the Auroras, color surfaces within the poem: “With its frigid brilliances, its blue-red sweeps / And gusts of great enkindlings, its polar green, / The color of ice and fire and solitude” (*PM* 308). The Auroras, due to their representation of the whole cycle of life and death, provide more vibrancy, more life, than established, flat traditions.

In canto III, Stevens shows how the Auroras represent all consequences of inevitable change, including the fact that it carries the imminent death of all metaphors. In canto III, space contracts; the first canto begins from the perspective of the universe, the second begins on an open beach, and the third begins in a family's home, perhaps the cabin introduced in canto I. The scene is intimate and the family exists together, perfectly in the immanence of the moment, with no teleological intrusion: "The mother's face, / The purpose of the poem, fills the room, / They are together, here, and it is warm, // With none of the prescience of oncoming dreams" (*PM* 309). The devotion they find exists in their perceptions, in their minds: "They are at ease in a shelter of the mind // And the house is of the mind and they and time, / Together, all together" (309). The joy they cultivate with each other comforts the family, but it eventually yields to the relentless lights. The family and the auroras exist in paratactic arrangement: their home juxtaposed with the presence of violent weather suggests that their warmth and safety are temporary:

"They are at ease in the shelter of the mind

And the house is of the mind and they and time,

Together, all together. Boreal night

Will look like frost as it approaches them

And to the mother as she falls asleep

And as they say good-night, good-night. Upstairs

The window will be lighted, not the rooms.

A wind will spread its windy grandeurs round

and knock like a rifle-butt against the door.

The wind will command them with invincible sound. (*PM* 309)

The lights of the auroras press up against the window, innocently and effortlessly encircling the house, the family's space. Change prevents the rooms from darkening—from permitting the family an undisturbed night's rest. Even inside the family's dwelling, death is present demonstrated by Stevens' inclusion of a quote from Hamlet, referencing Ophelia's madness and impending death: "good-night, good-night." Both from without and within, the natural processes of the earth situate human relationships within the context of inevitable change. Even the mother—whose face is "the purpose of the poem" and who serves as the emotional center of the family and of canto III—loses her power of intimacy and connection: "And yet she too is dissolved, she is destroyed" (PM 309). Her love is pure, innocent: she "gives transparence to their present peace. / She makes that gentler than can gentle be." Stevens resoundingly affirms her influence on the family. However, in this canto, Stevens wants to establish the fact that no depth of love permanently insulates anyone from death. Additionally, in canto III, Stevens injects uncertainty within the concept of possession. Like the serpent in canto I, which is "relentlessly *in possession* of happiness (italics mine)," Stevens uses the word possess twice: "the house is evening, half dissolved. / Only the half they can never possess remains, / Still-starred" and "It is the mother they possess." In both instances, the object of possession—evenings and the mother—slips out of anyone's control. Both entities are so firmly implanted within the process of change typified by the Auroras that they provide no lasting protection against their impersonal dominance. And the Auroras generate such power that one cannot ultimately shield oneself from them: "A wind will spread its windy grandeurs round / And knock like a rifle-butt against the door / The wind will command them with invincible sound."

In canto III, Stevens contextualizes “Auroras” with the inevitability of change and death. The poet includes these experiences throughout the poem, yet here he very carefully juxtaposes the contentment and connection possible within human life with the certainty of death. In doing so, Stevens shows the reader that death eventually conquers all people—even those who share a loving him. Thus, in canto III, more than the other cantos, Stevens asks the question of how humanity will respond to this inevitability once it thoroughly disrupts the intimacy of the home.

After the violent end of canto III, in canto IV, Stevens shows the value of categorical affirmation that surfaces from a variety of sources: human decision, the basic elements of the earth, and the need for the imagination to transform one’s surroundings. If this poem is Stevens’ mythology, then the fact that “the cancellings, / The negations are never final” implies a cyclical rhythm to human perception and understanding; things that formerly sufficed may do so again in a different form. The father’s choice to express his desire is the only constant in the canto. The father constantly affirms his surroundings and in so doing revels in change: “He says no to no and yes to yes. He says yes / To no; and in saying yes he says farewell” (*PM* 310). He delights in change to such an extent that “He measures the velocities of change.” Carroll describes the father’s affirmations, saying: “He says no to the anti-master-man’s denial of life, and he says yes to the virile poet’s affirmation of the imagination. Finally, he says yes to the principle of negation as the dynamic element of change within the essential poem.”²¹ The tone of the lines suggests that he measures these velocities from the position of reflection, after the changes have occurred. Thus, he simply measures them, familiarizing himself with the characteristics of various changes, out of pure desire, like a leisurely pastime. He

²¹ Carroll, *Wallace Stevens’ Supreme Fiction*, 244.

embraces the world as it impresses itself upon his senses in an evolving manner—as it naturally is: “He measures the velocities of change. / He leaps from heaven to heaven more rapidly / Than bad angels leap from heaven to hell in flames. // But now he sits in quiet and green-a-day. / He assumes the great speeds of space and flutters them / From cloud to cloudless” (*PM* 310). However, his creative faculty eventually rearranges the experience of his senses, “At the moment when the angelic eye defines / Its actors approaching, in company, in their masks.” The “angelic eye” is the father’s—or the self’s—imaginative eye that has started defining its surroundings. The imagination naturally emerges, interacting with the “great speeds of space” and “the actors approaching” in order to “define” them—to change them according to his own mind. Consequently, even the master is “seated by the fire / And yet in space and motionless and yet / Of motion the ever-brightening origin.” He interacts with, and alters—not escapes—the cycle of change present in the earth and in human life, and in doing so, Stevens describes him as leaping “from heaven to heaven.” Stevens asserts that when one adopts the natural cyclical rhythm of the earth, one constantly affirms, even amidst change: “He says yes / To no; and in saying yes he says farewell.”

Additionally, instead of worshipping the master, the origin, Stevens focuses his adoration on the throne, the seat of his power. The theme of sitting frequently recurs in this canto. Stevens refers to the father sitting three different times: “The father sits / In space, wherever he sits, of bleak regard (*PM* 310),” “But now he sits quiet and green-a-day,” and “Master O master seated by the fire.” In each instance, Stevens defines the place where the father sits by its ability to facilitate an imaginative, affirmative interaction with the world. Thus, the throne that a company must “choir” leads to the

world, not to the master. Stevens' use of the word "choir," instead of something like "explain" or even "address," suggests that the company must describe the master through artistic creation. Stevens shifts the focus away from the master, the God figure, onto the materials of the earth and humanity's interaction with them, recognizing the impossibility of finding a permanent origin, demonstrated by the presence of three different manifestations of sitting and by his positing of a rhetorical question: "What company, / In masks, can choir it with the naked wind?" Stevens responds to this question in the following canto.

In canto V, Stevens demonstrates that simply living one's life in the basic, most essential sense of one's identity, constitutes the best way to "choir," or "praise," the throne of the earth, as opposed to the attempt to force an elaborate celebration. Initially, the musicians, the mother, and the father try to carve specific meanings onto one's existence through expected, yet forced, means: "The mother invites humanity to her house / And table. The father fetches tellers of tales / And musicians who mute much, muse much, on the tales. // The father fetches negresses to dance, / Among the children, like curious ripenesses / Of pattern in the dance's ripening" (PM 311). While inviting people into one's home is a kind, hospitable gesture and hiring musicians and storytellers is entertaining, the tone of these lines suggests that this event lacks the element of creative spontaneity. The musicians seem unsure of how to proceed since their "muting" and "musing" implies the frequent stopping and starting of their instruments. The confused tales, along with the negresses, inspire the musicians to "make *insidious* tones, / Clawing the sing-song of their instruments. / The children laugh and jangle a tinny time." Charles Berger suggests that a proposed ritual "has turned into aimless frenzy: Stevens

seems suddenly to view the scene with adult eyes again, and what he sees is a new primitivism that has nothing folksy about it.”²² After the father “fetches pageants out of the air,” however, humanity’s natural condition of enacting a performance—inhabiting a variety of roles—simply by existing, by perceiving one’s surroundings, arises.

He sets a stage, and this action draws the most natural, affirmative response from the musicians: “Scenes of the theatre, vistas and blocks of woods / And curtains like a naïve pretence of sleep. // Among these the musicians strike the instinctive poem” (*PM* 311). Critic George Lensing asserts that the father’s decisions are uniformly bad throughout this canto. He says: “The decreed father...relapses into the worst of his offenses. Now no longer in diminishment ...both mother and father invite to their table a festival of “humanity.” But the celebration of musicians, negresses, pageants, and herds succumbs to “insidious tones.””²³ However, Lensing does not take the father’s full influence upon the passage into consideration. Once the father erects the stage, the forced façade of the first three stanzas dissipates, allowing the musicians to express their most natural, innocent artistry. Stevens praises the father; he participates in finally balancing the scene. The father then invites the “unherded herds, / Of barbarous tongue, slavered and panting halves // Of breath.” The group he gathers cannot choir anything in the most common sense of the term: with their voices. Stevens deliberately emphasizes their difficulty speaking—the only difficulties they have revolve around their mouths. The primary, expected method of “choiring” the throne has been prohibited. Their exaltation of the earth must arise from an uncommon source. Stevens describes this

²² Charles Berger. *Forms of Farewell: The Late Poetry of Wallace Stevens*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985. 55.

²³ George Lensing. *Wallace Stevens and the Seasons*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001. 99.

setting as “Chatillon or as you please.” Chatillon is a French word that refers to a community or a home—and he uses it to describe this varied scene. Stevens then continues to reflect the indeterminacy of his mythology by posing another rhetorical question. However, unlike in canto IV, here he immediately supplies the answer:

We stand in the tumult of a festival.

What festival? This loud, disordered mooch?

These hospitaliers? These brute-like guests?

These musicians dubbing at a tragedy,

A-dub, a-dub, which is made up of this:

That there are no lines to speak? There is no play.

Or, the persons act one merely by being here.

Attempts to enliven human existence by adding to it, shown in the first few stanzas of canto V, tend to distract from the natural beauty that arises from the self—“the instinctive poem.” Stevens maintains that no divine order exists to illuminate a specific path, a set of prescribed meanings that humanity must endeavor to embody. Instead, human life constitutes a play simply by existing, “merely by being here.” Nothing exotic, symbolized by the negresses, is necessary to bring this condition out: the “loud, disordered mooch” manifests it effectively. Simply living one’s life, as opposed to organizing special events, “choirs” the throne.

Stevens situates the human self within the cycle of transformations that occurs within the earth’s elements. In so doing, he suggests that humanity originates from the same innocent, constantly changing source as clouds, misted rocks, and the serpent from canto I. However, in canto VI, Stevens transcribes the festival from the preceding canto into the “theatre floating through the clouds,” in order to focus on this source more

directly. He ends canto V with the word “here,” signifying the presence of humanity on earth. He begins canto VI by describing this location, by expanding on the innocent stage on which the drama of civilization plays out. This theater, which is full of people in canto V, constitutes one of the interpenetrating elements of the earth. Stevens includes the various pageants the father fetches out of the air in canto V along with the other elements of the earth’s surface in one, fluid whole that expresses the ceaseless and innocent desire for transformation:

It is a theatre floating through the clouds,
Itself a cloud, although of misted rock
And mountains running like water, wave on wave,

Through waves of light. It is of cloud transformed
To cloud transformed again, idly, the way
A season changes color to no end,

Except the lavishing of itself in change.

The earth revels in change. Instead of the Christian imagery of the earth as a fallen world in need of redemption, Stevens offers an image of a thriving space in which change effortlessly occurs. Stevens uses airy, almost aimless language in canto VI in order to convey the natural peace of the innocent earth, using the lines to embody the canto’s contented drifting. The earth seems to celebrate itself. The cloud transforms “splashed wide-wise because it likes magnificence / And the solemn pleasures of magnificent space.” The cloud, and consequently the entirety of the earth given that each element blends with all the others, behaves like the serpent from canto I by relentlessly pursuing happiness: the “solemn pleasure of magnificent space” represent tranquility, peace, and contentment. Carroll suggests that this ethereal scenario falls apart “because the poet has

ceased to direct its transformations in a purposeful way.”²⁴ He mistakenly assumes that the images of destruction Stevens proffers near the end of the canto—the collapsing capitol and the scholar’s house—could have been avoided with proper attention. However, one of Stevens’ primary objectives in “Auroras” is to express the inevitability of change regardless of human intention and striving.

Everything thus far in canto VI is hazy and general, as if Stevens suggests that the individual must adopt a wide perspective from which to see the world in order for the sweeping changes to absorb him: “the cloud drifts idly through half-thought-of forms.” With this perspective, one can accept the reality of change; one becomes comfortable with the extreme change of an entire civilization in the course of one simple sentence enjambed over three lines: “A capitol, / It may be, is emerging or has just / Collapsed.” However, this perspective must take root in the self or else it goes unappreciated: “There are not things, no forms, without the self.”²⁵ Human interaction with the world only finds significance once humanity recognizes the need to allow our metaphors for understanding it to change: “This is nothing until in a single man contained, / Nothing until this named thing nameless is / And is destroyed.” It is “nothing” in the sense that humanity does not appreciate the earth and its beauty without adopting the rhythm of constant change exemplified within it. Accepting the constant transformation of the earth prevents complacency, which for Stevens equals death. As he declares in “An Ordinary Evening,” unshakeable certainty is dangerous: “We say of the moon, it is haunted by the man // Of bronze whose mind was made up and who, therefore died” (*PM* 337). Fearing the lack of control that the Auroras imply, however, interferes with such enlivening acceptance: “He

²⁴ Carroll, *Wallace Stevens’ Supreme Fiction*, 240.

²⁵ Riddel, *Clairvoyant Eye*, 14.

opens the door of his house // On flames. The scholar of one candle sees / An arctic
effulgence flaring on the frame / Of everything he is. And he feels afraid.” With one,
solitary candle, the scholar’s perspective is limited. The candle represents control—he
can manage one candle. He lights it and snuffs it out whenever he chooses.

Additionally, Stevens chooses to make this figure a scholar, attaching the possibility of a
solitary life driven by the pursuit of cognitive mastery of one’s surroundings, rather than
relational, understanding. He cannot control the Auroras, this symbol of the innocent
beauty and destructive power latent in the life of earth. Thus, he fears it. Stevens here
reintroduces the northern lights, which have disappeared from the previous two cantos,
the power of which terrifies the scholar, further demonstrating how the earth highlights
human limitation in the face of its power. Here again is the disconnection between truth
and reality seen in canto I. The inability to control the difficulties of human life
tragically prevents the self’s full engagement with it. This failure, for Stevens, is the
extent of human depravity.

Canto VII picks up where canto VI leaves off—by Stevens reiterating that the
Aurora Borealis represents an innocent force, without teleological purpose, that
perpetually transforms. However, in canto VII, Stevens emphasizes the true nature of
this innocent transformation: the fact that change causes the death of whatever metaphor
or attitude formerly ruled. Stevens begins canto VII by asking a series of rhetorical
questions. He asks:

“Is there an imagination that sits enthroned
As grim as it is benevolent, the just
And the unjust, which in the midst of summer stops

To imagine winter? When the leaves are dead,
Does it take its place in the north and enfold itself,
Goat-leaper, crystallized and luminous, sitting

In highest night? And do these heavens adorn
And proclaim it, the white creator of black, jetted
By extinguishing, even of planets as may be,
Even of earth, even of sight, in snow,
Except as needed by way of majesty,
In the sky, as crown and diamond cabala?

In a courtroom, opposing counsel might object to this line of questioning as leading—as trying to solicit a pre-determined, “correct” answer. Stevens implies that the answer to these questions is yes: there is an imagination that, like the serpent “relentlessly in possession of happiness,” contains equal measure of “grim-ness” and “benevolence.” It does assume its place “in highest night” and receive adornment there. However, the implied answer makes Stevens’ questions resemble a Christian catechism, such as the Heidelberg Catechism, which takes the form of question and answer and codifies a specific set of beliefs. The first half of canto VII confirms the innocence and inexorable change of the Auroras and of all human life since the elements of the earth are composed of the same material and they languidly transform into each other. The imagination “sits enthroned,” recalling the last lines of canto IV in which Stevens directs his attention to the throne instead of the king—to the realm rather than the ruler. Here, likewise, Stevens glorifies the imagination as the rightful heir to this throne. Stevens also draws attention to the paradoxical nature of the Auroras and, consequently, the imagination. “In the midst of summer,” of plenty, the Auroras “imagine winter.” The Northern Lights abide

by their own rules, affecting “the just and the unjust” equally. Only after the Auroras attain the throne, the pinnacle, of life on earth, does Stevens bestow the crown, which highlights its power. Additionally, the Auroras power provides unique access to the innocence of reality: “Except as needed by way of majesty, / In the sky, as crown and diamond cabala?” Stevens even describes this particular cabala using one of the earth’s hardest, most brilliant materials: a diamond. In the second half of the canto, Stevens returns to straightforward, declarative sentences that further confirm the Auroras power and glory. The Auroras are “jetted by extinguishing.” They destroy whole entities without hesitation: “It leaps through us, through all our heavens leaps, / Extinguishing our planets, one by one” (*PM* 313). It applies the destructive power to human relationships as well: “Leaving, of where we were and looked, of where // We knew each other and of each other thought, / A shivering residue, chilled and forgone.” Furthermore, this power to change is inextinguishable: “But it dare not leap by chance in its own dark.” However, even the enthroned imagination changes: “It must change from destiny to slight caprice.” The constant change of the seasons of the earth, which the Auroras represent so beautifully, brings new life at the expense of whatever came before, confirming the scholar’s fear that he is not in full control of his own life—he cannot narrow the scope of his surroundings to one, manageable candle. The natural cycle of the earth, of birth, life, death, and renewal, weaves the innocent power of ceaseless change into the very fabric of existence.

In Canto VIII, Stevens emphasizes the attitude that innocence should instill. He claims: “There may be always a time of innocence. / There is never a place. Or if there is no time, / If it is not a thing of time, nor of place, // Existing in the idea of it, alone, / In

the sense against calamity, it is not / Less real” (*PM* 314). Once again, Stevens expresses the ultimate inscrutability of truth, even one so clearly articulated throughout “Auroras;” he remains uncertain regarding whether or not a time of innocence exists. Stevens’ mythology refuses to rest on certainties derived from an objective process of rational thought. Instead, by recognizing the inevitability of change, the human mind witnesses the emergence of the imagination. By moving away from “the oldest and coldest philosopher” who thinks of innocence “as pure principle,” the individual comes to recognize that clinging to the presumed certainty of fact or tradition has the tendency to weigh down the self. Like “the extremist in an exercise” from canto II, without change, centuries of uniformity carve a stagnant complacency into an individual, a family, or even a whole civilization—as Stevens mentions in the next canto: “This drama that we live—We lay sticky with sleep” (*PM* 315). Instead of approaching innocence instrumentally, trying to use it for a specific purpose, Stevens suggests that the lack of teleological purpose within his mythopoeia allows innocence to exist in each moment, in its most essential terms: “Its nature is its end, / That it should be, and yet not be, a thing / That pinches the pity of the pitiful man.” Critic Rajeev Patke asserts: “The idea of innocence is one he cannot afford to say farewell to.”²⁶ Indeed, while Stevens subjects innocence to the same uncertainty as the rest of existence, he also takes care to include more specificity regarding how to recover it. Initially, he claims that there is “always a time of innocence.” As we examine below, he later allows the mother to create “the time and place” for innocence. Patke overstates the point by ascribing too much specificity to the concept and neglecting to recognize that Stevens does implicitly identify a time and

²⁶ Rajeev S. Patke. *The Long Poems of Wallace Stevens: An Interpretive Study*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985. 211.

place for innocence—simply not a permanent one—but he rightly recognizes its significance to Stevens, saying: innocence “must be identified accurately and located precisely: as existing neither in place nor in time, free even from the wishful and emotive memory which called it forth, and available only as a pure principle.”²⁷ For Stevens, in its most basic sense, innocence satisfies and dissatisfies; it heartens and disheartens: “Like a book at evening beautiful but untrue, / Like a book on rising beautiful and true.”

Innocence envelops the earth; it provides the context in which humanity lives. Stevens’ claims: “It is like a thing of ether that exists / Almost as predicate.” Ether immobilizes the human body, but ancient philosophers believed that it also surrounded the earth. In “Auroras,” the use of this word implicates both possible definitions. Thus, it overwhelms the self, but it is also ethereal. However, Stevens insists that it exists: “But it exists, / It exists, it is visible, it is, it is.” Patke notes that here Stevens employs “repetition to convert the wished for into the real.”²⁸ Stevens repetition also injects the element of human will into one’s securing of innocence. Throughout canto VIII, Stevens examines the ways in which people acquire knowledge. He claims that a mere intellectual idea is as real as anything clearly rooted in time and space. Similarly, his insistence in the reality of innocence indicates that knowing contains an element of faith and commitment to a belief. In this case, Stevens advocates belief in the indiscriminate, beautiful, and inevitable nature of innocence. He declares:

So, then, these lights are not a spell of light,
A saying out of a cloud, but innocence,
An innocence of the earth and no false sign

²⁷ Patke, *The Long Poems of Stevens*, 211.

²⁸ Patke, *The Long Poems of Stevens*, 212.

Or symbol of malice. That we partake thereof,
Lie down like children in this holiness,
As if, awake, we lay in the quiet of sleep,

As if the innocent mother sang in the dark
Of the room and on an accordion, half-heard,
Created the time and place in which we breathed.

Stevens gives an image of the full acceptance of innocence, implying the acceptance of the necessity of change, which allows the imagination to arise. Stevens also recalls the mother, “the purpose of the poem,” from canto III. Once the imagination and the mother’s innocent love inhabit the poem together, as well as artifice due to her accordion serenade, Stevens amends the first statement in the canto. Imagination and love create the possibility of a time and a place for innocence. Once the poet accepts the sincerity and power of innocence, once humanity engages in the sacramental rite of this acceptance, which Stevens incorporates through his language of partaking which evokes the image of Communion in the Christian Church, the canto becomes more intimate, demonstrated by phrases such as: “lie down like children in this holiness,” “the quiet of sleep,” and by the poet’s reference of a person’s peaceful, slow, nighttime breathing. Stevens shows the utter centrality of accepting change. He explores this theme more fully in the next canto, after separating cantos VIII and IX with an ellipsis—the only time in “Auroras” when two cantos are intended to be so deliberately connected.

In canto IX, Stevens shows that the imagination fosters happiness and a sense of connection between people. In the same room in which the mother “Created the time and place in which we breathed,” any individual—Stevens language of “we” in regard to this moment implies this broad extent—who applies the process of change to their lives

engages in “the idiom of the work” (*PM* 315). Participating in such an idiom can be expressed with the same level of accuracy as “the idiom of an innocent earth,” as opposed to “the enigma of the guilty dream,” which refers to the description of the world as suffering under the divine curse of total depravity. The acceptance of Stevensian innocence opens the mind to the power of the imagination to find resemblances and to revel in its creativity. Such an imagination, for Stevens, refreshes one’s existing circumstances. Stevens language projects the image of children playing games all day, enjoying themselves: “We were as Danes in Denmark all day long / And knew each other well, hale-hearted landmen” (*PM* 315). Their imagination also creates the right context in which people feel comfortable and capable of flourishing. Children, as evident in many different religions and systems of thought, are the most likely subjects to live their lives based on the innocence of their desires and disregard the commandments of any “guilty dreams.” These children accept the unusual, the “outlandish,” as just “another day of the week.” Additionally, sharing an imaginative experience—when all parties agree to apply the innocence of change and the resulting emergence of the imagination—creates a sense of intimacy and community: “We thought alike / And that made brothers of us in a home / In which we fed on being brothers, fed // And fattened as on a decorous honeycomb.” Critic Justin Quinn asserts:

[“The Auroras of Autumn”] provides a ceremonious rhetoric that provides a community with a vision of its place in the world. Prior and necessary to all political and ideological through must be this sense of a community’s shared fate and its place on the earth. Such work is usually done by mythology and religion, but Stevens’s poem is remarkable for its actue sense of the way that

this mythopoesis is constantly active around us, creating the time and place in which we breathe.”²⁹

When one acknowledges the inherent innocence of human life, imaginative play in which people forge connections and enjoy life surfaces. In this passage of “Auroras,” Stevens employs playful, ornate language. Words and phrases such as “Danes in Denmark,” “hale-hearted landmen,” “outlandish,” and “decorous honeycomb” lighten the tone of the poem, conveying the sense that, finally, Stevens’ mythology offers an example of human beings behaving in accordance with the natural rhythm of the universe.

Such free-flowing language contrasts with Canto II’s repetitive stiffness. Instead of detailing the complacency and emptiness of a long-standing family home, as he does in canto II, in canto IX, Stevens describes a home in which the inhabitants create their own meaningful connections rather than relying on tradition to provide them. Stevens contrasts notions of what constitutes family in the two cantos. Canto II relies on traditional conceptions with a beach house shared by one family, presumably related by blood. However, in canto IX, the imagination connects people: “We thought alike and that made brothers of us in a home / In which we fed on being brothers.” Stevens continues in canto IX, emphasizing that one must actively choose to live such a life since the commonplace events of society tend to obstruct such a choice: “This drama that we live—We lay sticky with sleep. / This sense of the activity of fate— / The rendezvous, when she came alone, / By her coming because a freedom of the two, / An isolation which only the two could share.” Making the choice to live this way creates a space for others to follow; it involves recognizing that innocence “is not less real” even if it comes

²⁹ Justin Quinn. *Gathered Beneath the Storm: Wallace Stevens, Nature, and Community*. Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2002. 64.

from the commitment of an individual, as opposed to the certainty of tradition. Even in the canto that displays human beings living by their imaginations and finding connections with each other, death has the final word: “It may come tomorrow in the simplest word, / Almost as part of innocence, almost, / Almost as the tenderest and truest part.” However, even here in which death forms such a significant presence, Stevens’ language embraces it. Since “it may come tomorrow,” it is ultimately out of human control. Thus, humanity must accept it. However, Stevens preserves the reality that death involves pain and loss by reiterating the word “almost” three times in the final stanza. Stevens presents an image of thriving, imagination-based life amidst the inevitability of death, suggesting that death must be accepted as the conclusion of the process of innocence.

After the heights of canto IX, in canto X, Stevens recalls one of this major themes from the first canto: he describes the reasons humanity does not accept the innocence of life and its inherent change. Canto I describes a serpent that people fail to recognize is “relentlessly in possession of happiness” due to excessive reliance on traditional connotations associated with snakes. Humanity, for Stevens, lacks the imagination to ascribe new metaphors to serpents—metaphors based on the bedrock belief in the innocence of life. In canto I, that discussion returns. Stevens explores all of the different combinations of people and world. However, he begins with his initial suspicion: “An unhappy people in a happy world— / Read, rabbi, the phases of this difference” (*PM* 316). Initially, Stevens concludes that too much obvious testimony of the innocent beauty and happiness of the world exists for total unhappiness: “An unhappy people in an unhappy world— // Here are too many mirrors for misery.” The prevalence of mirrors confronts humanity, and perhaps more importantly, nature, with far too much evidence of

happiness, with far too many living entities in pursuit and possession of happiness. Stevens then declares that without a happy world, humanity would not find anything to express: “a happy people in an unhappy world— / It cannot be. There’s nothing there to roll / On the expressive tongue, the finding fang.” Next, Stevens eliminates the possibility of comprehensive happiness: “A happy people in a happy world— / Buffo! A ball, an opera, a bar.” The language Stevens uses to express this possibility is silly; Stevens equates the possibility of happy people in a happy world with a joke. Stevens eventually recovers his original claim—“Turn back to where we were when we began: / An unhappy people in a happy world.” In doing so, he returns to what he considers the most honest representation of the world as it is. This is the only acceptable starting point.

From here, Stevens suggests that humanity generates a sacred text—a type of gospel that guides human life: “Now, solemnize the secretive syllables.” Stevens admonishes the rabbi to ceaselessly confront humanity with the reality of their unhappiness in an attempt to show them how a negative approach to existence is misguided and obfuscating and in order to encourage the cultivation of a different attitude: “Read to the congregation, for today / And for tomorrow, this extremity, / This contrivance of the spectre of the spheres, // Contriving balance to contrive a whole, / The vital, the never-failing genius, / Fulfilling his meditations, great and small.” Repeatedly preaching the same sermon, on the imaginative bankruptcy of humanity, facilitates the attempt to continually meet the problem with new imaginative solutions, “contriving balance to contrive a whole.” Additionally, any possible solution must work within a context of difficulty, not ease: “In these unhappy he meditates a whole, / The full of fortune and the full of fate, / As if he lived all lives, that he might know, // In hall

harridan, not hushful paradise, / To a haggling of wind and weather, by these lights / Like a blaze of summer straw, in winter's nick." Shaviro asserts:

The mediated whole, "the full of fortune and the full of fate," which in poetry is "directly and indirectly [got] at" (*PM* 351), is the sum of a series of fated eccentricities, each of which subsists and insists "as a part, but part, but tenacious particle" of an indeterminate but entirely positive "giant of nothingness, each one / And the giant ever changing, living in change" (*PM* 320).³⁰

He does all of this so "that he might know, / In hall harridan, not hushful paradise, / To a haggling of wind and weather, by these lights / Like a blaze of summer straw, in winter's nick" (*PM* 316). "Knowing" once again comes from experiencing, not from cognitive certainty. All of this exists as a demonstration of Stevens' overarching poetic purpose, to help people live their lives, so that humanity might know how to survive in the world, from the standpoint of realistic difficulty, by means of the innocence and change demonstrated by the Aurora Borealis, which in the end are likened to a "blaze of *summer* straw," something warm and satisfying amidst forbidding winter. Not allowing oneself to reify leads to a life of intimacy, warmth, and freedom. It also facilitates one's imagination. In other words, it allows the energy of desire to find an outlet, rather than to lie dormant within the self.

In "The Auroras of Autumn," Stevens articulates the belief that all living entities endlessly change—that they live the entire course of life within the context of constant transformation. However, change uncovers the primacy of desire: "Desire does not seek final satisfaction; it continually multiplies and reproduces itself...The insistent particularity of desire in its movement toward closure keeps it perpetually open."³¹ Thus, inexorable change, as demonstrated by "Auroras of Autumn," reveals the centrality of

³⁰ Shaviro, "That Which is Always Beginning," 230.

³¹ Shaviro, "That Which Is Always Beginning," 222.

imagination and desire, the combination of which affirms life by continually inspiring new engagements with one's surroundings.

Chapter Two

Inhabiting the Moment: the affirmation of Life in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*

One of the recurring themes in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* is an attempt to articulate the need to experience the immediacy of the present moment, no matter what it includes. The present continually resurfaces in the poem, and Eliot infuses it with some of the most difficult human experiences to affirm: anxiety, fear, and suffering. For Eliot, these common problems prevent people from recognizing the structure of love and purpose that undergirds every moment of time. However, as we have seen, simply living within the procession of time precludes insulating oneself from pain: this undergirding structure will eventually confront each human self. Certain moments, which in *Four Quartets* repeatedly take the form of agony or sudden illumination, reveal this underlying structure, providing opportunities to connect to it—and in *Four Quartets*, they always emphasize the present moment. The emphasis on dwelling in the present, in contrast to clinging to one's past successes or failures or the expectations of one's future, grounds human existence in embodied experience. Critic Keith Alldritt claims: "Being is not a mindless mystification; knowing is now experientially grounded. The unity, the reconciliation which 'Little Gidding' conveys is a synthesis of the two experiences."³² Ultimately, *Four Quartets* affirms life by proclaiming the inevitability of suffering, and the subsequent necessity of being fully engrossed in the immediacy of each present moment.

³² Keith Alldritt. *Eliot's Four Quartets: Poetry as Chamber Music*. Totowa, New Jersey: The Woburn Press, 1978. 123.

In its most basic element, Eliot's choice of a musical structure for his last long poem suggests that one of his primary goals is to exalt the centrality of immanence to a life of affirmation. Discussing the significance of the quartet form, Alldritt, referencing an essay by Mallarme claims: "There are two concepts of music:...the sounds which one may hear in a concert hall and those 'immanent poems' of which the concert music as mediated by the instruments is but a fragmented and approximate version."³³ Musical scores, through their recurring, yet slightly altered themes and motifs constitute the "immanent poems" that ideal, Platonic poetry could elicit. While the notes may inspire conversation, they do not proffer fully formed, propositional sentences for one's consideration. Instead, they make a more physical, emotional appeal; emotions are inextricably tied to the experiences of a physical body. Consequently, while music does not attempt to circumvent or denigrate the capacity of the mind to understand the reasons why composers write their scores, it expresses emotion in such a way that it does not emphasize intellectual comprehension. In other words, the fact that music resists the intelligence allows the physical, embodied experience of hearing the music an equal share of significance; the body is an integral component, as well. Thus, in choosing to base *Four Quartets* on a musical structure, Eliot signals his intention for the poem to not only resist any attempt at conclusive interpretation, but also the fact that themes will continually recur throughout, and the body will remain just as important as the mind.

In addition to the musical component of the quartet structure, Eliot employs four different voices that recapitulate the same basic points. However, the fact that the voices are spread across various lines throughout the different quartets indicates an even more diffuse, intricate method of interweaving Eliot's meaning throughout the poem. Alldritt

³³ Alldritt, *Poetry as Chamber Music*, 24.

claims: “The full account, the complete version is the sum and interaction of all four performances.”³⁴ Many scholars identify different voices speaking throughout *Four Quartets*. In *Words Alone: The Poet T.S. Eliot*, Denis Donoghue finds four within the beginning of “Burnt Norton.” He claims: ““Burnt Norton” begins with four statements about Time, each spoken by a different voice.”³⁵ Alldritt categorizes them differently, saying: “The four verbal roles which we hear may be described as those of the lecturer, the prophet, the conversationalist and the conjuror.”³⁶ However, Alldritt also identifies the voice of the poet himself standing behind all of the others, enacting the voices within the poem. He suggests that the presence of the author speaking each voice constitutes the source of the conflict within the poem: “The author of the work is not just one voice, nor does he apprehend reality in one way, nor does he talk about it in one verbal style. He is a set of different, sometimes insufficient, sometimes contradictory perceptions and his modes of language vary.”³⁷ Roger Bellin contends that the division of voices is not as clean as many critics have assumed—they frequently overlap and the attempt to highlight their differences has become too dominant in *Four Quartets* criticism. Ultimately, the presence of different voices illustrates the multiplicity of meaning within the poem:

Hugh Kenner found four voices, the “lyric, didactic, colloquial, and deliberative” (261)... We might wish to inflect Kenner’s division of voices somewhat differently: the separateness of the “deliberative” and “didactic” voices is not always certain... But his basic terms remain convincing. Kenner rightly insists on the *Quartets*’ effacement of any unitary authoritative voice; the text may have a figural relation to the “Invisible Poet,” but it does not speak for him directly. The poem uses anonymity as a “self-sustaining technique” (251), as the “indispensable condition” of its

³⁴ Alldritt, *Poetry as Chamber Music*, 39.

³⁵ Denis Donoghue. *Words Alone: The Poet T.S. Eliot*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000. 230.

³⁶ Alldritt, *Poetry as Chamber Music*, 39.

³⁷ Alldritt, *Poetry as Chamber Music*, 51.

existence. There is no obvious textual justification that would cement the identity of any of the poem's voices or modes with each other, nor with Eliot.³⁸

Ultimately, these critics agree on the basic point that Eliot uses different voices within *Four Quartets* in order to further emphasize the multiplicity of truth.

In *Four Quartets*, Eliot addresses a variety of reasons that prevent people from living in the moment. Eliot claims that human beings affix rigid, misleading categories onto experiences in an attempt to mitigate the uncertainty of the future. However, living in time means being susceptible to shock. Additionally, this simply prevents people from recognizing that they are a new revaluation of themselves in every moment. In other words, it impedes change, and encourages cynicism and disappointment with their lives, like the old men in "East Coker" whose "serenity [is] only a deliberate hebetude" (*CP* 184). Eliot begins "Burnt Norton" by decrying the temptation to reduce the unpredictability of time by trying to comprehend it academically, and thus tame it. He claims: "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past (*CP* 175)." The short, clipped tone of these lines, which includes words of just one and two syllables, gives them an academic, mathematical tone. Donoghue rightly describes these opening lines as "a bewildered seminar."³⁹ Additionally, Eliot directs his musings toward "time future" and "time past." "Time present" receives the least amount of his attention—he does not list an attempt to recognize the past in the present, and when he mentions the present, it simply serves to elucidate the possibilities of the future. Additionally, they sound almost like a mantra that one repeats to oneself over and over in an attempt to allow the truth of these

³⁸ Roger Bellin. "[The](#) Seduction of Argument and the Danger of Parody in the *Four Quartets*." *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (Winter, 2007), pp. 421-441. 423.

³⁹ Donoghue, *Words Alone*, 255.

propositional statements to finally sink in. Here at the beginning of “Burnt Norton,” Eliot attempts to dodge the present—to determine the past and predict the future. However, the following line reveals the senselessness of this endeavor. Eliot immediately claims: “If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable.” The endeavor to figure out time is the attempt to make all moments of one’s past and future intellectually available to oneself in the present moment. By trying to understand time, one attempts to nullify the anxiety and suffering that can result from living within it. As the poem unfolds, Eliot demonstrates that such an attempt to evade living through time’s harshness and disappointment ironically prevents an affirmative life of being truly present in the moment. Eliot suggests what Alyosha Karamazov realizes soon after the death of his mentor: in order for time to be redeemed—by which Eliot means, in part, that the genuine meaning of experiences are made known—one must not attempt to avoid it. Instead, one must enter it, deciding to “sojourn” within it.

In Section V of “The Dry Salvages,” Eliot criticizes attempts to determine the future. He writes:

To communicate with Mars, converse with spirits,
To report the behavior of the sea monster,
Describe the horoscope, haruspicate or scry,
Observe disease in signatures, evoke
Biography from the wrinkles of the palm
And tragedy from fingers; release omens
By sortilege, or tea leaves, riddle the inevitable
With playing cards, fiddle with pentagrams
Or barbituric acids, or dissect
The recurrent image into pre-conscious terrors—

To explore the womb, or tomb, or dreams; all these are

Pastimes and drugs, and features of the press. (*CP* 198)

Perhaps this passage goes on for a few more lines than necessary. However, Eliot may have included so many different examples of efforts “To explore the womb, or tomb, or dreams,” which translates into birth, death, and one’s future, in order to emphasize the extensiveness and laboriousness of such attempts. Additionally, Eliot employs the use of many hard, pointed sounds within the passage, underscoring the imprudent roughness such endeavors entail, words such as “communicate,” “converse,” “horoscope,” “haruspicate,” “scry,” “wrinkles,” “barbituric,” and “dissect.” Eliot clearly seeks to discourage these “Pastimes and drugs” of divining one’s future experiences through “wrinkles of the palm.” He goes on to say: “Men’s curiosity searches past and future / And clings to that dimension.” To seek the future in such ways symbolizes clinging to the past and the future—For Eliot, it represents a desire to avoid living through the hardship and uncertainty of the present.

For Eliot, the contemporary world teems with mechanized objects that distract from that which is truly important: the moment. In “Burnt Norton,” Eliot describes people in the modern world, saying that they have: “Only a flicker / Over the strained time-ridden faces / Distracted from distraction by distraction / Filled with fancies and empty of meaning / Tumid apathy with no concentration / Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind / That blows before and after time (*CP* 178).” He goes on to list several specific locations in the London area, places such as: “Hampstead and Clerkenwell, Campden and Putney.” Eliot’s likening of human beings with scraps of paper arises from his perception of English society’s proclivity toward avoiding the present moment. Eliot locates the source of such weightlessness in the beginning of the stanza, with the word

“Here.” The emphasis he places on this word suggests the ubiquity of the following state of affairs, the “place of disaffection.” It is sharp, monosyllabic, and heavily stressed, which enables it to apply pressure to the specificity of London’s “gloomy hills,” but also loosens it from that foundation so that it can describe any place and directly implicate the reader. It jumps off the line and into whatever context the reader brings to the words.

Eliot also warns against allowing one’s history to create a grid that automatically categorizes all experiences, preventing the novelty of new encounters from leaving their unique mark. In Section II of “East Coker,” Eliot declares: “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 (*CP* 185).” This statement appears to contradict his earlier claim in “Burnt Norton,” in which Eliot uses the beautiful pattern on a Chinese jar to illustrate his belief that “Only by the form, the pattern, / Can words or music reach / The stillness, as a Chinese jar still / Moves perpetually in its stillness,” and that “the detail of the pattern is movement” (*CP* 180). However, in “Burnt Norton,” the pattern continues to move, to evolve. Consequently, the Chinese jar, representing different arrangements of words, retains the power to shock, to break through monotony, to “reach / Into the silence” and force a perceiving subject to encounter it on its own terms, rather than categorize it through an “imposed pattern.” In “East Coker,” knowledge “*imposes* a pattern.” The different verbs Eliot uses indicate his intention: “reach,” used in “Burnt Norton,” conveys motion and fluidity while “imposes,” in “East Coker,” implies rigidity. Additionally, Eliot cites the relentlessness of time—which in “East Coker” could be defined as the protracted length of a human life—as one of the corrosive agents that

inspires a retreat from the moment. Eliot contextualizes his mention of imposing, falsifying patterns with a discussion of the disappointment of old age. He claims:

What was to be the value of the long looked forward to,
Long hoped for calm, the autumnal serenity
And the wisdom of age? Had they deceived us,
Or deceived themselves, the quiet-voiced elders,
Bequeathing us merely a receipt for deceit?
The serenity only a deliberate hebetude,
The wisdom only the knowledge of dead secrets
Useless in the darkness into which they peered
Or from which they turned their eyes. (*CP* 184-185)

The experiences of a long life prove to be primarily a state of self-imposed lethargy that struggles to address “the darkness” of new circumstances. The steady relentlessness of time creates specific expectations from experience. However, Eliot asserts “There is, it seems to us, / At best, only a limited value / In the knowledge derived from experience.” Expecting the “wisdom of age” to bring nothing but “autumnal serenity,” implies excessive reliance upon experience and a retreat from the potential “revaluation” of the present.

Conversely, as Eliot demonstrates in Section V of “Burnt Norton,” allowing a consistently renewing pattern, one that uses the same medium, such as words or the detailed intricacy of a Chinese jar, to make continually new impressions forces the individual to dwell firmly within each moment, being attentive to the specificity of one’s surroundings. The attempt to use knowledge to generate a means by which one can more easily categorize, and therefore understand, experience symbolizes a desire to avoid the revaluating capacity of each new moment. Consequently, for Eliot, an attempt to lessen

the difficulty of living through time drives the individual away from the active, uncontrollable present: “For the pattern is new in every moment / And every moment is a new and shocking / Valuation of all we have been” (*CP* 185). Eliot suggests that when an individual allows knowledge to impose a pattern of comprehension onto new experiences, that pattern “falsifies”—both as the experience takes place and in retrospect—creating a situation in which “We had the experience but missed the meaning” (*CP* 194).

However, while the relentlessness of time prevents individuals from fixing their mistakes or making sure they discern constructive meanings from experiences, Eliot maintains that individuals cannot help but return to their memories—or speculate on what might have been if one had made different decisions. In Section I of “Burnt Norton,” the thrush beckons the poet into the rose garden without any persuasion. Eliot writes: “Other echoes / Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow? / Quick, said the bird, find them, find them, / Round the corner. Through the first gate, / Into our first world” (*CP* 175-176).

Additionally, Eliot repeats the question “Shall we follow?” In both instances the poet offers no response. It is a rhetorical question; the poet has no choice but to follow.

Words also draw the poet—and the reader—back into his memories: “Footfalls echo in the memory / Down the passage which we did not take / Towards the door we never opened / Into the rose-garden. My words echo / Thus, in your mind (*CP* 175).” Sounds, like written words, have their own histories. Eliot connects a variety of sounds to memories in Section I of “Burnt Norton.” Thrushes are known to have some of the most beautiful voices of any bird and the language of footsteps echoing down a corridor both lead the way to the rose garden. The past is unavoidable. Both the thrush, which appears

inexplicably—like a sudden illumination—and the use of language draws humanity back in time, to memory. Eliot’s words also draw the reader along with the poet into the garden. The connection between reader and poet is further forged by the use of collective personal pronouns: “us,” “our,” and even “my” and “your” come straight from Eliot to the reader signifying, right from the first section of the first quartet, that Eliot seeks to achieve a universality with *Four Quartets*. Eliot subsumes everyone under the same problem—chiefly a lack of control. The unbidden thrush, and its power to influence the poet’s mind, as well as his didactic address straight to the reader suggests that the scene is taking place without deliberate arrangement. Of course, Eliot himself composes the poem. However, within its words a form of the poet exists that is not privy to this construction; he is subject to the same cloud of unknowing as the reader. For both the character of Eliot within the poem, and for the reader, *Four Quartets* begins outside of our control.

The poet’s entrance into the garden shows how the inevitable search into one’s history ends in disappointment when undertaken without an attitude of receptivity to the moment, and to the possibility of suffering. In order to convey this element of the scene, Eliot deliberately infuses the rose garden with a great deal of uncertainty and imprecision. Harry Blamires asserts: “Eliot catches exactly our uncertainty whether there *is* joy and meaningfulness lurking just out of sight, out of grasp; whether the glimpses we have are fragments of a true or of an illusory revelation; whether that which calls or that which impels is indeed reliable and real.”⁴⁰ No detail of the memory manifests itself to the poet with any clarity or longevity: the characters within the memory are “dignified,” but also

⁴⁰ Harry Blamires: *Word Unheard: A Guide through Eliot’s Four Quartets*. London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1969. 11.

“invisible.” Furthermore, he cannot hear the “unheard music in the shrubbery.” Also, the vision of the figures within the garden arises as he peers into an empty pool filled not with water, but “with water out of sunlight,” as they stand behind the poet. However, their presence fades for the most delicate of reasons: “And they were behind us, reflected in the pool. / Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.”

Additionally, he places the memory, which the poet admittedly enters for no apparent reason—“But to what purpose / Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves / I do not know”—immediately after ruminating on how time cannot be comprehended or predicted. The scene in the rose-garden recapitulates Eliot’s philosophical lecture on time. The poet enters the garden with a similar intention as the querying lines that begin “Burnt Norton.” Much like his initial attempt to decipher time, instead of attempting to perceive the emotional connection of the present or of his memories, he attempts to identify the specific objects within the scene in order to stabilize it through intellectual exertion—in order to grasp the meaning. He succeeds at naming certain things. He can see leaves, roses, a dry, concrete pool, and a rising water flower, but the experience remains hazy as a result of his misguided intentions. However, Eliot describes much of the scenery as dead or parched: “dead leaves,” “Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged.” Donoghue argues:

The direction of this passage, its abstracting style, maintains a distanced relation to events. No impression of immediacy, of an irresistibly punctual convergence of deed and word, experience and the words for it, is allowed to enforce itself. Events will intrude, but only at the remove of memory. Even then, they are events that didn’t happen but might have happened. So while the

governing style seems to change from abstract to concrete, from generalizing to narrative, the change is only ostensible, at the double remove of “memory” and “echo.”⁴¹

The indeterminacy and fragility of the memory suggests that the poet’s presence there is somehow misguided. Throughout the duration of the scene, the poet is deprived of his senses. He hears “other echoes / Inhabit the garden,” but he barely sees them, and their music does not reach his ears. The attempt to interact with one’s memory purely through mental exertion fails. Through the garden scene, Eliot hints at the centrality of embodied experience, represented, as we will examine below, by the children’s laughter, over the imprudent pursuit of detached intellectual certainty. The poet cannot be physically present in a memory; everything he sees is an insubstantial substitute for an embodied, present experience.

Despite the detached tone of the scene in the rose garden, the poet maintains a thin, veiled relationship to the figures in the garden. Thus, while his sojourn back in time lacks attention to the right details, the fact that he and the invisible people in the garden move together “in a formal pattern,” along with the emergence of the “lotos,” indicates that searching one’s history potentially yields meaningful results. These results surface when the figures in the memory look into the pool. Blamires contends:

Our life assumes a shaped artistic delightfulness as we and they move into the ‘box circle’ to the centre of square and circle alike...And here, at the centre, the moment of revelation is given to us. It is given to us when we are not actively looking for it, not searching the shrubs or the trees to try to locate the hidden laughter and unseen eyes, but looking quietly, undemandingly, down into the drained, dry concrete pool, the most commonplace spot—yet at the heart of the garden. The illumination comes suddenly from behind and above when the sun floods the pool with light as

⁴¹ Donoghue, *Words Alone*, 255-256.

though with water, the water lily rises, and on the glittering 'surface' are reflected the presences
till this moment invisible.⁴²

The poet's approach to the pool represents his, and the reader's, approach to memory: the poet moves to the edge of a dry, decaying empty vessel—something that should contain water, which enables the pool to serve its purpose, thus giving it meaning, but instead must be filled with something less substantial: "water out of sunlight." A source outside of the self fills the pool. It pours in from behind the poet, foreshadowing, as we will examine below, a moment of sudden illumination. The poet also watches the "lotos" rise. This particular flower represents promise. However, when Eliot describes the poet's viewing of the lotos, he uses the past tense: "And the lotos *rose*, quietly, quietly (*italics mine*)." His use of the past tense connects the lotos to the roses mentioned throughout "Burnt Norton." In Eliot's first two uses of the word, he uses it to represent one's memories, and their assumed pristine quality before we return to them: "Footfalls echo in the memory / Down the passage which we did not take / Towards the door we never opened / Into the rose-garden" and "But to what purpose / Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves / I do not know." Next, Eliot describes the flowers within the garden, saying, "the roses / Had the look of flowers that are looked at." Here, Eliot's uses of the past tense and his distance from those who truly see the roses, like the rising lotos, suggest that memories contain the promise of beauty. Thus, the fact that the lotos "rose" unifies these two meanings, definitively implying that returning to memory, to history, symbolized by the return to an empty pool, holds promise. While the first exploration into memory ultimately reveals the poet's misunderstanding of how to appropriate the meaning of his experiences, the rising flower suggests that the effort of trying to clarify

⁴² Blamires, *Word Unheard*, 13.

one's experiences does offer the possibility of meaning. However, it is only a fleeting victory: he loses the images quickly when a cloud passes, further emphasizing the scene's instability.

However, while the poet's presence has been tolerated up to this point by the thrush, the bird knows that the poet will not be able to endure the laughing children. Their laughter represents innocence and pure, embodied joy. Hearing their laughter constitutes a revaluation of experience by eliciting an emotional response from the poet that he cannot control—maybe excitement or nostalgia or disappointment that he cannot participate. The poet cannot handle such a challenge: it would tether him to his body, which is rooted within the present. Additionally, the initial entrance to the garden is described as “our first world.” “Other voices inhabit[ing] the garden” entice the poet to turn “round the corner” and enter. However, Eliot refers to the children's laughter simply as “reality.” As opposed to the “dignified, invisible” shades Eliot spies by the pool, people “Moving without pressure,” whose “eyebeams” Eliot cannot see and whose music he cannot hear, he remains entirely capable of hearing the children's laughter. It is the most important element of the memory. The children laugh most likely because they are playing a game in the leaves. They are fully embodied and present in their moment. The poet is not ready for the potential extremes of emotion, both joy and pain, of embodied reality. Eliot ends Section I of “Burnt Norton” with the lines: “Time past and time future / What might have been and what has been / Point to one end, which is always present.” The poet is not yet capable of living in the present. However, one's journey into memory, like the garden, must be directed toward the present in order to have its fullest effect on his experience and understanding of time. Ultimately, the fact that the memory

sneaks up on the poet simply by the echo of words and footfalls in the memory shows that individuals inexorably encounter the potential moments of revaluation. Additionally, by use of imprecise language and imagery, Eliot sets up the garden scene to represent the inevitability of searching one's memories, the difficulty of applying them to the present, as well as the potential for meaning that can be found there.

Throughout *Four Quartets*, Eliot includes many examples of the inevitability of change. One of the reasons the poet cannot find any lasting stability within the rose garden is precisely due to this inescapability. Michael Levenson recognizes that *Four Quartets* "thematize the necessity of change. They insist upon discontinuity in both the poetry and the poet's life; they devalue 'the knowledge derived from experience'."⁴³ Furthermore, the changing nature of life on earth reveals the inevitability of death and places humanity within a context of constant flux. As a result, every experience described in *Four Quartets* permeates with uncertainty regarding the source of its authority; as Alldritt posits: "All the experiences described in *Four Quartets* are in some way questionable as to authenticity."⁴⁴ The changing nature of human society implies that the flux must be accepted; it precludes conclusive understanding of any experience. However, Eliot describes the inexorability of change as a cycle. Thus, ultimately, the flux of reality constitutes the grounds of renewal for the self.

The poet's subjectivity, his use of the "I," injects the entirety of *Four Quartets* with uncertainty. In "East Coker" section III, Eliot enters the poem explicitly. He exhorts: "You say I am repeating / Something I have said before. I shall say it again. / Shall I say it again" (CP 187)? The emergence of the poem's author should inspire

⁴³ Michael Levenson. "The End of Tradition and the Beginning of History," in *Words in Time: New Essays on Eliot's Four Quartets*. Ed. Edward Lobb. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993. 160.

⁴⁴ Alldritt, *Poetry as Chamber Music*, 69.

certainty, like a teacher stopping a lesson in order to ensure that the students understand the intended meaning. However, in *Four Quartets*, Eliot's presence only further emphasizes the lack of stability found in language and experience. He must clarify an earlier statement, demonstrated by the extremely direct language that follows his second guessing: he makes statements such as "To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not, / You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy." The complex phrasing obscures the meaning, yet this statement and each successive one filling out the rest of Section III takes the form of a direct address from the poet to the reader, further emphasizing language's instability. The experience this language describes, a mystical descent into the self, is consequently just as unpredictable. Prior to the equivocating "I," Eliot claims:

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing. (CP 186)

Here Eliot describes an evacuation of all objects of faith, hope, and love in an effort to arrive at the purest, most immediate experience of being—a moment only supported by God and one's body. While I will postpone my analysis of the mystical component of *Four Quartets*, the uncertain "I" is all that separates this passage and the more direct statements Eliot makes in an attempt to explain the meaning of this mystical evacuation in a different way. In reference to earlier manifestations of "I," Roger Bellin claims:

In "Burnt Norton" the later *Quartets*' equivocating "I" makes its appearance in only two lines: "I can only say, *there* we have been: but I cannot say where. / And I cannot say, how long, for that is

to place it in time”; here as elsewhere, the “I” exists as a method of breaking out of the poem’s narrative progression, a way of arresting the poem’s flow long enough to inject doubt about what can be said. The “I” calls into question the capacity of language, the ability of the poem to contain its meaning...In fact, far from unifying its voice and its argument, the “I” of the poem’s obsessive self-interpretation infects the whole text with the self-reflexive uncertainty.⁴⁵

Eliot deliberately includes moments of indecision in order to demonstrate the instability of language and experience—the instability of living in the moment. Additionally, in Section II of “The Dry Salvages,” Eliot proclaims the inevitability not only of change, but of death. He asks: “Where is there an end of it, the soundless wailing, / The silent withering of autumn flowers / Dropping their petals and remaining motionless.” He continues to say, “There is no end, but addition (*CP* 193).” Eliot uses the sea to represent the ubiquity of death throughout all civilizations across history. Thus, death and decay serve as bonding agents connecting all people together. The sea “tosses up our losses, the torn seine, / The shattered lobsterpot, the broken oar / And the gear of foreign dead men (*CP* 191-192).” However, in “East Coker,” Eliot also places death within a cycle that includes the entirety of life on earth, and contains within it the means of regeneration: “In my beginning is my end. In succession / Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended, / Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place / Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass. / Old stone to new building, old time to new fires, / Old fire to ashes, and ashes to the earth” (*CP* 182). Eliot begins this passage with the certainty of his own death—“In my beginning is my end.” He then employs the word “houses” in order to incorporate both a physical house and a family lineage, and shows how they rise and fall, leading ultimately to the earth, the foundation upon which the cycle rests: everything “is already

⁴⁵ Bellin, “The Seduction of Argument,” 424-425.

flesh, fur and faeces.” While death and change are inevitable, by subsuming it within cycles of human life, Eliot also suggests that it offers the possibility of renewal.

Accepting the eventuality of death and suffering allows the individual to dwell in the moment, without being preoccupied by past or the future. In Section II of “The Dry Salvages,” “moments of agony...are likewise permanent / With such permanence as time has” (*CP* 195). Generally, people avoid agony and struggle, yet Eliot suggests that it exerts a potentially positive influence in a human life. He asserts:

We appreciate this better
In the agony of others, nearly experienced,
Involving ourselves, than in our own.
For our own past is covered by the currents of action,
But torment of others remains an experience
Unqualified, unworn by subsequent attrition.
People change, and smile: but the agony abides.
Time the destroyer is time the preserver,
Like the river with its cargo of dead negroes, cows and chicken coops,
The bitter apple and the bite in the apple. (*CP* 195)

The poet claims that moments of agony shape the self. Unlike monotonous moments, they draw forth more of the individual’s resources—whether it is physical or emotional pain, agony forces the self to respond and it intensifies every passing moment. Thus, Eliot praises agony and hints that individuals should accept them and learn from them when they arise; it is unfortunate that people allow our particular experiences of agony to be “covered by currents of action.” The moments in time that destroy individuals also facilitate their preservation, their ability to live in the moment.

“The Dry Salvages” III further demonstrates that entering into difficult scenarios, rather than hiding from them, enables one to affirm life amidst hardship by being fully engrossed in each moment. Eliot admonishes the reader: “Fare forward travellers! not escaping from the past / Into different lives, or into any future; / You are not the same people who left that station / Or who will arrive at any terminus” (*CP* 196). Eliot uses the metaphor of a train because the passengers aboard are unable to alter their lives—in between their departure and their destination, they must simply occupy themselves in a prolonged, pseudo-timeless moment. Additionally, while on the train, they move while sitting still. Eliot continues, saying: “You shall not think ‘the past is finished’ / Or ‘the future is before us’.” If each moment is a shocking revaluation of the entirety of a human life, then each moment involves the traveler recognizing that exclusive reliance upon one’s history or one’s anticipated future prevents being fully present—fully intent—in every new moment. The passengers who settle into their “fruit, periodicals and business letters... Their faces relax from grief into relief, / To the sleepy rhythm of a hundred hours” allow their lives to lull them into numbness. However, the poet does not imply that the past or the future are irrelevant to an individual; just as a traveler does not “escape” the past, he does not begin a completely new, or “different,” life. Instead, Eliot claims that each successive moment demands one’s full attentiveness.

The poet expands on the need to attend to each moment by claiming that such devotion ultimately enables constructive interconnection between people. He proclaims:

‘Fare forward, you who think that you are voyaging;
You are not those who saw the harbour
Receding, or those who will disembark.
Here between the hither and the father shore

While time is withdrawn, consider the future
And the past with an equal mind.
At the moment which is not of action or inaction
You can receive this: “on whatever sphere of being
The mind of a man may be intent
At the time of death”—that is the one action
(And the time of death is every moment)
Which shall fructify in the lives of others:
And do not think of the fruit of action.
Fare forward. (*CP* 196-197)

In “the moment which is not of action or inaction,” Eliot evacuates every possible distraction that could inhibit human life. He leaves only one’s existence, which inexorably includes mortality—“the time of death is every moment.” Furthermore, if the time of death is every moment, then being intent—or engrossed—at the time of death means being engrossed in every moment. Eliot urges the reader to “fare forward” into unknown moments of time embodying this engrossment, without attempting to project a preexisting set of expectations onto it. Approaching human life in this manner, Eliot contends, frees the individual to encounter each new moment on its own terms. In so doing, one’s own agenda fades into the background and one’s life fructifies, or “bears fruit,” “in the lives of others.” Thus, since each moment assumes massive significance and concern for the welfare of other lives surfaces at the time of death, which is every moment, Eliot advocates that each moment contains both the self and the other—that each must be present for any particular moment to reach its fullest potential.

In order to avoid being paralyzed by cycles of life and the inevitability of death, Eliot argues for the need to pursue a mystical connection to timelessness, which is

essentially a connection to God. Meditation expels all of the various distractions that prevent the self from paradoxically appreciating the immediate moment and the timeless moment—from perceiving the timeless within time. However, ultimately, connecting to timelessness, to God, pushes the self back into the moment. In “Burnt Norton” Section III, Eliot admonishes the reader to:

Descend lower, descend only
Into the world of perpetual solitude,
World not world, but that which is not world,
Internal darkness, deprivation
And destitution of all property,
Desiccation of the world of sense,
Evacuation of the world of fancy,
Inoperancy of the world of spirit;
This is the one way, and the other
Is the same, not in movement
But abstention from movement; while the world moves
In appetency, on its metallated ways
Of time past and time future. (*CP* 179)

Eliot repeats the word “world” eight times in the final stanza of Section III. Six of those instances involve the negation of a certain world—of sense, fancy, spirit, or even “World not world.” Regarding these six negations, Eliot uses “world” to suggest that each instance represents a self-contained entity: “the world of sense,” “the world of fancy,” and the world of spirit” constitute three differentiated worlds. However, through meditation, Eliot demands that the reader penetrates to a deeper level—“Into the world of perpetual solitude,” which lies underneath these other, specific worlds. This deeper world arrests movement, preferring “abstention from movement.” Thus, dispelling the

various worlds of distraction connects one to timelessness within time, signified by the distinction Eliot makes between the world outside of the meditative state, which proceeds as always, concerned with “time past and time future.” In contrast, the world of meditation enables the individual to avoid being preoccupied by the past and future.

The ability to perceive the important, life affirming elements within each successive moment eventually begins to arise through mystical connection to timelessness. In “East Coker” Section III, Eliot claims:

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing. (*CP* 186)

Eliot continues the evacuation initiated in “Burnt Norton” III, trying to empty himself of any active attempt to hope for or love anything in particular. For Eliot, the proposed eradication of these theological virtues reveals that they exist inherently within the deepest reaches of the self: “But the faith and love and the hope are all in the waiting.” Faith, hope, and love permeate the self even while meditating. Reaching this level of meditation enables new images to emerge. Immediately following the above quote, Eliot declares: “Whisper of running streams, and winter lightning. / The wild thyme unseen and the wild strawberry, / The laughter in the garden, echoed ecstasy / Not lost, but requiring, pointing to the agony / Of death and birth” (*CP* 187). From out of the meditative dark, the barely discernible presence of gentle streams, uncontrollable weather, colorful plant-life, and the rose garden begin to manifest themselves to the poet.

Eliot describes the children's laughter as "echoed ecstasy." However, this ecstasy points "to the agony / Of death and birth" (*CP* 187)—it indicates the necessity of living through the process of time. Thus, Eliot hints that timelessness and time are paradoxically connected in each successive moment—"Only through time time is conquered" (*CP* 178). He also suggests that meditative connection to timelessness allows a more genuine sense of self to surface, which in turn brings the individual closer to the ability to fully engage with the laughter in the garden—with the specificity of each moment—by forcing the individual to "be still, and let the dark come upon you / Which shall be the darkness of God" (*CP* 186). In this stillness, the type of motionlessness that appears "when an underground train, in the tube, stops too long between stations / And 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" (*CP* 186), an individual encounters his or her most genuine self—the core of being that the world's distractions obscure.

Eliot also uses the human body to represent the importance of accepting death and embodiment. In Section II of "Burnt Norton," embodiment is cosmically important:

Garlic and sapphires in the mud
Clot the bedded axle-tree.
The trilling wire in the blood
Sings below inveterate scars
Appeasing long forgotten wars.
The dance along the artery
The circulation of the lymph
Are figured in the drift of stars
Ascend to summer in the tree

We move above the moving tree
In light upon the figured leaf
And hear upon the sodden floor
Below, the boarhound and the boar
Pursue their pattern as before
But reconciled among the stars. (*CP* 176-177)

Eliot uses extremely embodied, physical language in this passage. He includes “mud,” “blood,” “scars,” “wars,” “The dance along the artery,” “The circulation of the lymph,” and “boarhound.” All of these words project imagery of physical, tactile substances, many of which are messy or dirty—like the mud and the boarhound—but all of which root the passage in the earth. Additionally, the reality of scars inscribed on the body gestures towards the ultimate imperfection of the human body as well as long-endured pain, or at least the reminder of pain. The quick rhyming of this passage allows the reader to move quickly through the lines, which forces Eliot to employ harsh images that make an immediate impression. However, while the perspective evident in these lines begins in very earthen language, it rises above the ground, to a point slightly “above the moving tree.” “The dance along the artery” is “figured in the drift of the stars.” When the perspective arrives above the tree—coming to Eliot’s timeless moment—it acknowledges the pattern of embodied life that continues on the ground to be “reconciled among the stars.” Embodied life receives a sanction from the heavens.

In “East Coker” I, Eliot uses a wedding ceremony to demonstrate how the human body and connection between people enables the self to fully inhabit each moment amidst the earth’s cycles of life and death. As discussed above—regarding the first stanza of “East Coker” I, which begins “In my end is my beginning”—*Four Quartets* recognizes

cycles of death and renewal. After the first stanza, Eliot includes a brief stanza, in which someone waits for wisdom: “Now the light falls / Across the open field, leaving the deep lane / Shuttered with branches, dark in the afternoon, / Where you lean against a bank while a van passes (*CP* 182).” Light lazily falling across an open field while a figure leans against a bank offers no movement—it projects feelings of stasis. Additionally, the figure must lean against a bank amidst a city street. He could not stay there all day: he must be counting the minutes until something happens. Eliot continues to claim that the scene “wait[s] for the early owl,” a common symbol of wisdom. Following this shorter stanza, Eliot includes a wedding ceremony—a sacramental moment of human connection. The first stanza, on cycles of life, is separated from the third stanza, on human connection, by a brief stanza about waiting for wisdom to appear. He implies that embodied human connection responds to the first stanza’s locked cycles.

Eliot uses the rhythms of the wedding party’s dancing, as well as more earthy and bodily language, in order to suggest the centrality of embodiment to the affirmation of life and the moment. Additionally, unlike the scene in the rose garden in which Eliot was deprived of his senses, the poet hears the ceremony’s music, and it draws him in: “In that open field / If you do not come too close, if you do not come too close, / On a summer midnight, you can hear the music / Of the weak pipe and the little drum / And see them dancing around the bonfire” (*CP* 183). Eliot goes on to identify the necessary physical and spiritual connection forged by marriage: “The association of man and woman / In daunsinge, signifying matrimonie— / A dignified and commondious sacrament. / Two and two, necessarye coniunction, / Holding eche other by the hand or the arm / Whiche betokeneth concorde.” The use of sixteenth century spelling in this passage indicates the

historical nature of the scene, but more specifically, it also incorporates Eliot's own ancestry. Blamires contends that in the last stanza of Section I, "It now appears that the poet is actually revisiting the ancestral village and the site of the ancestral house."⁴⁶ Additionally, Sir Thomas Elyot of East Coker wrote "a treatise on education, *The Governour*, [which was] published in 1531."⁴⁷ Blamires deepens the connection to Eliot's ancestor claiming that, in *The Governour*, Elyot asserts that "dancing is not just a symbol of marriage and social harmony: it is a symbol of universal harmony."⁴⁸ Marriage, as Thomas Elyot contends and Thomas Stearns Eliot continues, "is not a vague harmony or good-fellowship. It is a blending of potentialities."⁴⁹ For Eliot, then, marriage constitutes the joining of different people into one unit—the resolution of opposites through embodied connection.

The poet links such unified connection to the flourishing of the earth and the inevitable life cycles therein. Eliot claims:

Round and round the fire
 Leaping through the flames, or joined in circles,
 Rustically solemn or in rustic laughter
 Lifting heavy feet in clumsy shoes,
 Earth feet, loam feet, lifted in country mirth
 Mirth of those long since under earth
 Nourishing the corn. Keeping time,
 Keeping the rhythm in their dancing
 As in their living in the living seasons
 The time of the seasons and the constellations

⁴⁶ Blamires, *Word Unheard*, 43.

⁴⁷ Blamires, *Word Unheard*, 41.

⁴⁸ Blamires, *Word Unheard*, 44.

⁴⁹ Blamires, *Word Unheard*, 45.

The time of milking and the time of harvest
The time of the coupling of man and woman
And that of beasts. Feet rising and falling.
Eating and drinking. Dung and death. (CP 183)

Each individual at the ceremony takes his or her place in the dancing circles, as they move around the fire, which, as we will see below in our discussion of “Little Gidding,” represents necessary yet painful purification. Their rhythmic movement suggests a fuller sense of embodiment by projecting the imagery of quick movements done according to a prescribed pattern. Additionally, Eliot uses heavy, physical language and verbs that imply difficult movement—“heavy feet,” “loam feet,” “lifted in country mirth”—in order to connect such rhythmic dancing to earth’s cycles: the “mirth” of those “long since under earth / Nourishing the corn.” Also, just as dead bodies nourish the soil, Eliot suggests that the lives of people throughout history nourish the lives of those in the present. The dead people in the marriage ceremony are “long since under the earth / Nourishing the corn,” however their emotional connection, their “mirth,” nourishes the man lazily leaning “against a bank” earlier in the section by providing an image of embodied, human connection that can be perceived in the present.

In Section V of “The Dry Salvages,” Eliot draws together all of the various themes evident throughout *Four Quartets* and inscribes them onto the human body. Eliot proclaims:

But to apprehend
The point of intersection of the timeless
With time, is an occupation for the saint—
No occupation either, but something given
And taken, in a lifetime’s death in love,

Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.
For most of us, there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time,
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts. (CP 198-199)

Each successive moment constitutes an intersection between time and timelessness. Such moments surface throughout *Four Quartets*. As Blamires indicates, Eliot claims that such moments ““point to one end which is always present” (CP 176); in “East Coker,” they “point to the agony of death and birth” (CP 187).”⁵⁰ For Eliot, this point of intersection constitutes one of the primary means by which an individual comes to affirm the present. However, Eliot reveals that this combination of timelessness and time is “an occupation for the saint.” The word “occupation” suggests that the career, the business, of the saint is to discern such moments. However, “it is not an ‘occupation’ in the professional sense: one cannot thereby earn a living.”⁵¹ Instead, these moments arise by sudden illumination due to the humility of the saint: “a lifetime’s death in love, / Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender” facilitates the apprehension of such moments.

Eliot declares that such halcyon moments of perception rarely happen for the unsaintly. However, he asserts that the body enables anyone to perceive the point of intersection and, consequently, affirm the need to dwell in the moment. In direct contrast to his earlier claim that “the mind of man may be intent at the time of death,” Eliot

⁵⁰ Blamires, *Word Unheard*, 118.

⁵¹ Blamires, *Word Unheard*, 118.

exclaims that “For most of us, there is only the *unattended* / Moment (italics mine)” in which human beings allow themselves to be distracted from acknowledging “The wild thyme unseen...or music heard so deeply / That it is not heard at all.” Much like timelessness undergirding each moment of time, Eliot contends that music is also present underneath human awareness. Music is pure form and, as discussed above, it transcends words. Thus, when Eliot directly addresses the reader, declaring “but you are the music / While the music lasts,” he connects the human body to music’s pure form, to the expression of emotion in a manner that surpasses language. However, as demonstrated by the fact that *Four Quartets* expresses its points in various ways, using different voices and employing a musical structure that prevents singular interpretation, Eliot expresses the connection between the human body and music through the use of words. Both the language of the poem and the allusion to music’s emotional form point to the centrality of the body in each successive moment. According to Eliot, each person embodies this music, regardless of whether or not they recognize it. A human life is a musical score with its recurring experiences, from which one learns or refuses to learn. Additionally, a composer imposes a specific pattern on musical notes, turning them into a score that expresses something specific, and thereby creating meaning. By comparing a self to music, Eliot suggests that a human life follows the same pattern, that the unavoidable glance back into memory is an attempt to perceive moments of sudden illumination and thereby discern meaning within experience—meaning, such as the centrality of humility, that recurs in every moment. Furthermore, such meaning implies action: “And right action is freedom / From past and future also” (CP 199). If a human self is music, and music resists the intelligence, situating it on the same level of importance as the body and

the ability to experience emotion, then the poet likewise equates understanding and action. “Right action,” ethical action toward the other that exemplifies “Ardour and selflessness” enables full presence in the moment—one that “past and future” cease to dominate.

Eliot further declares that the purpose, or meaning, of coming to affirm the moment is not to achieve results, but to cultivate an attitude of receptivity to the present and humility toward others. Regarding the claim about the freedom of right action, he declares: “For most of us, this is the aim / Never here to be realized; / Who are only undefeated / Because we have gone on trying; / We, content at the last / If our temporal reversion nourish / (Not too far from the yew-tree) / The life of significant soil” (*CP* 199). The words “nourish” and “soil” recall Section I of “East Coker,” in which the embodied bond forged by the wedding ceremony nourishes the life of the poet in the present by connecting him to his ancestral past and by serving as an example of how to live contently within the inevitable cycles of life and death. Additionally, since these cycles are inevitable, the dead bodies of those in the wedding ceremony nourish the soil. Thus, just as the married couple find connection and a way to affirm life, yet they cannot escape death, the poet, in “The Dry Salvages,” claims that the way to return continually to the present with renewed vigor, and avoid the paralyzing potential of “past and future,” is to continue to try, to incessantly return to each successive moment accepting the inevitability of defeat. Dwelling in the present will always include pain—the goal of completely eradicating suffering is the “aim never here to be realized.” In his combination of didactic and moralizing voices, Eliot declares in “East Coker” that “We are only undeceived / Of that which, deceiving, could no longer harm (*CP* 185),” he

implies that defeat is inevitable, but not conclusive: humanity is “only undefeated /
Because we have gone on trying.”

The body enables such presence in the moment by being the instrument of right action. Eliot declares: “The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation. / Here the impossible union / Of spheres of existence is actual, / Here past and future / Are conquered, and reconciled (*CP* 199).” Eliot capitalizes the word “Incarnation” in order to indicate the embodiment of Jesus. In Christian theology, Jesus is both fully God and fully man. The full presence of both natures enables His death on the cross to atone for human sin, thereby bridging the chasm between a depraved humanity and a righteous God. Thus, Eliot suggests that Jesus’ Incarnation “conquers and reconciles” between the “spheres of existence,” between time and timelessness. Furthermore, the Christian Church terms the co-presence of both natures within the body of Christ the Hypostatic Union. Thus, Eliot’s use of the word “union” further emphasizes his intention to refer to Jesus. However, additionally, Eliot does not use a definite pronoun along with “Incarnation.” Additionally, Eliot enjambes the word over two lines: “Incarna” and “tion.” He uses both of these techniques in order to lessen the specificity of the word, so that it can apply to a general human body as well. Recalling “Burnt Norton” Section III, Eliot claims: “Yet the enchainment of past and future / Woven in the weakness of the changing body, / Protects mankind from heaven and damnation / Which flesh cannot endure (*CP* 178).” The body, “Caught in the form of limitation / Between un-being and being” (*CP* 181), decays over time. However, this decay, “the weakness of the changing body,” far from hindering a life of contentment, facilitates it precisely through its capacity for the full range of human experiences, through its capacity to feel pleasure and

pain. Unlike angels or demons, “demonic, chthonic / Powers” (CP 199), the human body under the effects of time allows for development and change. The experience of a body through time is “The bitter apple and the bite in the apple.” By use of the word Incarnation, Eliot implies that both in Jesus’ body, and in any human body, “the past and future / Are reconciled” through “right action” undertaken with the knowledge that we are “only undefeated / Because we have gone on trying.”

Eventually, in “Little Gidding,” Eliot brings the poem more firmly and urgently into the present by setting the final quartet within the context of the Luftwaffe bombing of London during WWII. Newman remarks on the distinctive character and setting of the last quartet, saying: “The last movement of *Little Gidding* is a remarkable Christian affirmation, striking a note of transcendence and hope that was desperately needed in the dark days of 1942 when the poem first appeared.”⁵² While Eliot never disconnects the present moment from the support of timelessness, love, and divinity, in “Little Gidding,” it takes on a value of its own: dwelling firmly within the present, especially amidst suffering and hardship is, for Eliot, the only way to secure genuine freedom from the oppression of fear, pain, and uncertainty. The language Eliot uses for his last quartet demonstrates his desire to raise the stakes, to bring the present moment into more obvious conflict with human suffering. “Little Gidding” sets the scene using prominent hard letter sounds. In Section II, Eliot declares: “the dark dove with the flickering tongue / Had passed below the horizon of his homing / While the dead leaves still rattled on like tin / Over the asphalt where no other sound was” (CP 203). Words and phrases like “dark dove,” “flickering tongue,” and “asphalt,” convey harshness and severity. Additionally, the dark dove refers to German dive bombers destroying London. “Little

⁵² Newman, “Eliot’s Affirmative Way,” 428.

Gidding,” to which Eliot assigns the element of fire, takes place in the rubble of a bombed out city.

The last two stanzas of Section I represent the paradox of time and timelessness both leading to the present. In stanza two, Eliot identifies an individual’s most likely, specific path to the present moment, and sets that path within the flow of time.

Furthermore, Eliot includes more specific, embodied language that implies the daily activities of a city: “If you came this way, / Taking the route you would be likely to take, / From the place you would be likely to come from, / If you came this way in may time, you would find the hedges / White again, in May” (*CP* 200), and “If you came at night like a broken king...It would be the same, when you leave the rough road.” In contrast, in the third stanza, Eliot employs much more general, spiritual terms. He claims: “If you came this way, / Taking any route, starting from anywhere, / At any time or at any season.” Here Eliot does not mention any specific person or place. Instead, he focuses his attention on “the conscious occupation / Of the praying mind.” He discusses the mystical communion with timelessness that facilitates connection with the dead: “And what the dead had no speech for, when living, / They can tell you, being dead: the communication / Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.” However, despite the fact that each stanza bears a different emphasis, both lead to the present moment. Stanza two ends: “But this is the nearest, in place and time, / Now and in England.” Stanza three ends: “Here, the intersection of the timeless moment / Is England and nowhere. Never and always” (*CP* 201). The setting of “Little Gidding” is a paradoxical combination of “the nearest in place and time” and “the timeless moment,” but England grounds them both. While one of the moments is more firmly situated

within the quotidian life of human society, and one appeals to the timeless ethereal, neither moment escapes the setting of the country and both concentrate on its present trouble. However, this present moment evolves—it is not simply a static moment immune to circumstances. Eliot declares: “And what you thought you came for / Is only a shell, a husk of meaning / From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled / If at all. Either you had no purpose / Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured / And is altered in fulfillment” (*CP* 201). Thus, one does not easily grasp the present moment, thereby making it something understandable and controllable. Instead, the meaning of the present emerges through experience; as Alldritt claims: “knowing is now experientially grounded.”⁵³ Being attentive to the changes of the present alters the self by the shaping of character.

In Section II of “Little Gidding,” Eliot attempts to purify *Four Quartets* by subjecting all of the elements corresponding to each quartet to a pentecostal fire. Burning every element evident within the poem enables Eliot to express with greater clarity and precision the significance of engrossment with each present moment. He claims:

Ash on an old man’s sleeve
Is all the ash the burnt roses leave.
Dust in the air suspended
Marks the place where a story ended.
Dust inbreathed was a house—
The wall, the wainscot and the mouse.
The death of hope and despair,
This is the death of air.

⁵³ Alldritt, *Poetry as Chamber Music*, 123.

Eliot ascribes the physical element of air to “Burnt Norton.” In the first quartet, Eliot introduces the image of roses, attributing them to memories. Additionally, Eliot mentions houses, wainscots, and mice in Section I of “East Coker.” Eliot also includes the language of the body in his destruction: “There are flood and drouth / Over the eyes and in the mouth, / Dead water and dead sand / Contending for the upper hand.” He also puts worship of God and music to the flames: “Water and fire shall rot / The marred foundations we forgot, / Of sanctuary and choir.” Finally, like the first stanza of “Little Gidding” Section II proclaims the death of air, the second stanza declares the “death of earth,” and the third stanza ends with “the death of water and fire.” Thus, Eliot throws “Burnt Norton’s” air, “East Coker’s” earth, “The Dry Salvage’s” water, and even the present “Little Gidding’s” fire into the flames. However, fire does not permanently destroy these elements. In Section I of “Little Gidding,” Eliot exclaims “And glow more intense than blaze of branch, or brazier, / Stirs the dumb spirit: no wind, but pentecostal fire / In the dark time of the year” (*CP* 200). The event of Pentecost is recorded in the biblical book of Acts, chapter five. It states that fire came down from the heavens, striking thousands pilgrims who spoke different languages, enabling them to understand each other—Pentecostal fire fosters connection across cultures and civilizations. Thus, Eliot does not intend to permanently destroy the entirety of human existence. Instead, he attempts to refine it by bringing it into the present. However, the poet still must burn away something else before he can become engrossed in the moment to the greatest extent. He must place the self and his history in the flames.

The setting in which the poet interacts with the “dead master” suggests that the poem stands on the precipice of renewal. However, before the poet enters into the

present more fully within “Little Gidding,” he interacts with this ghost “In the uncertain hour before the morning / Near the ending of interminable night/ At the recurrent end of the unending” (CP 202). Similar to the “anxious worried women” who try to “piece together the past and the future, / Between midnight and dawn, when the past is all deception” (CP 192), Eliot sets this interaction just before the dawn and when the rubble of London conveys only the sense of death: “While the dead leaves still rattled on like tin / Over the asphalt where no other sound was / Between three districts whence the smoke arose / I met one walking, loitering and hurried.” Similar to “Burnt Norton,” in which the scene seems to arrange itself around the poet, the shade of dead master appears “As if blown towards [the poet] like metal leaves.” The scene arises like a moment of sudden illumination on the cusp of breaking dawn, of renewal.

In contrast to Eliot’s presence in the rose garden in “Burnt Norton,” in which the poet heard many voices, but could not interact with any, in “Little Gidding,” the poet focuses on one person who contains multitudes. Additionally, through this interaction, Eliot brings the embodied present into sharper focus by maintaining a sustained encounter with one individual. Alldritt claims: “Contact with him is the first human contact that is reported since the sense of the children in the garden at Burnt Norton.”⁵⁴ As the ghost approaches, Eliot exclaims: “I caught the look of some dead master / Whom I had known, forgotten, half recalled / Both one and many; in the brown baked features / The eyes of a familiar compound ghost / Both intimate and unidentifiable” (CP 203). The identification of a multitude suggests that the upcoming “crown upon [his] lifetime’s effort” reflects his poetic value from a wider scope of society; the purification Eliot’s work receives originates from a communal source. Thus, Eliot intends for this interaction

⁵⁴ Alldritt, *Poetry as Chamber Music*, 97.

with the dead master to take place in front of a wide audience. However, he also “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—.” The paratactic arrangement of these two divisions of individual people—the master to a multitude and the poet to a “double part”—suggests the criticism Eliot is about to receive arises from within himself just as much as it does from outside voices. While Eliot torches the elements of the earth by fire, the purification that surfaces here arises through interpersonal interaction that includes the various voices latent within the self and yet also reflects a community.

After bringing the elements of the earth to a close, Eliot also submits his poetic career to the same fire in order to enter the present in a more engrossed, attentive way; his interaction with the ghost of a former master embodies the earlier aphorism that “the mind of man may be intent at the time of death.” He claims:

Since our concern was speech, and speech impelled us
To purify the dialect of the tribe
And urge the mind to aftersight and foresight,
Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age
To set a crown upon your lifetime’s effort.
First, the cold friction of expiring sense
Without enchantment, offering no promise
But bitter tastelessness of shadow fruit
As body and soul begin to fall asunder.
Second, the conscious impotence of rage
At human folly, and the laceration
Of laughter at what ceases to amuse.
And last, the rending pain of re-enactment

Of all that you have done, and been; the shame
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
Of things ill done and done to others' harm
Which once you took for exercise of virtue.
Then fool's approval stings, and honour stains.
From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit
Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire
Where you must move in measure, like a dancer. (*CP* 204-205)

In "East Coker," the "wisdom" of old men leads to dissatisfaction with one's surroundings. The poet then demands: "Do not let me hear / Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly" (*CP* 185). "The gifts reserved for age" in Little Gidding fulfill this appeal, and in so doing they, surprisingly, offer wisdom and hope for the future. As the poet's "body and soul begin to fall asunder," the awareness of his ineffectual moods emerges—"the conscious impotence of rage / At human folly"—and he slowly comprehends unrecognized selfish intentions of past actions—"the shame / Of motives late revealed," the poet begins to realize that these aggravations and sins tie him to his history, even to his successes, in a way that prevents full inhabitation of the present moment. The line "bitter tastelessness of shadow fruit" recalls "The Dry Salvages" Section II in which Eliot claims that time is both "The bitter apple and the bite in the apple." Thus, the "bitter tastelessness" recalls a moment in which something that initially appears repulsive eventually becomes sustaining. Similarly, the difficulties the poet encounters in old age appear repugnant and yet, their recognition sustains him by shaping his character. Eliot declares that the refining fire, so ubiquitous in "Little Gidding," requires that one "move in measure, like a dancer." "Dancing" surfaces in a couple of important places in *Four Quartets*, both of which emphasize the necessity of embracing

embodiment. In “Burnt Norton,” Eliot signals the pattern of embodied human life: “the dance along the artery” (*CP* 177). In “East Coker,” Eliot describes the wedding ceremony using the word “dancing,” implying people engaged in the very act itself, three different times, one of which in sixteenth century spelling: “And we see them dancing around the bonfire,” “In daunsinge, signifying matrimonie,” and “Keeping the rhythm in their dancing” (*CP* 183). Dancing entails the full employment of the body as an individual follows patterned rhythms and movements. Additionally, a dancer must focus all thought to the present, in order to stay upright and execute the movements properly. Thus, by tying “refining fire” to the need to move “like a dancer,” Eliot ultimately suggests that a “lifetime’s effort” must be purified by the continual recognition that one’s experiences shape one’s character and that an individual must live like a dancer, recognizing the importance of the body and fully inhabiting the present moment.

Since the present continually fades and resurfaces, the centrality of commitment to human life emerges in “Little Gidding.” Eliot declares in Section III:

This is the use of memory:
For liberation—not less of love but expanding
Of love beyond desire, and so liberation
From the future as well as the past. Thus, love of a country
Begins as attachment to our own field of action
And comes to find that action of little importance
Though never indifferent. History may be servitude,
History may be freedom. See, now they vanish,
The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them,
To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern. (*CP* 205)

For Eliot, the expanding of love beyond desire liberates by nullifying the possible servitude that can ensue from history. The specifics of each moment of history fade along with the passing of each present moment, only to emerge once again in a new pattern. This constant death and rebirth signal the inevitability of change, and necessitate that “love of a country / Begins as attachment” to an individual’s behavior, but eventually finds that “England and nowhere. Never and always” demands devotion. However, for Eliot, one’s “field of action” is always overlaid by the present moment: “If I think, again, of this place, / And of the people, not wholly commendable, / Of no immediate kin or kindness, / But some of peculiar genius, / United in the strife which divided them... And a few who died forgotten / In other places, here and abroad... Why should we celebrate / These dead men more than the dying” (*CP* 206)? The lives of the dead are transfigured and recast in the lives of the people in the present. And, reiterating his point that individuals experience, rather than intellectually understand, the present Eliot claims: “Whatever we inherit from the fortunate / We have taken from the defeated / What they had to leave us—a symbol: / A symbol perfected in death” (*CP* 206). Death perfects the symbol because it opens up to consistent interpretation—the people who created the symbol are no longer here to explain it. Eliot claims that “All shall be well and / All manner of thing shall be well / By the purification of the motive / In the ground of our beseeching” (*CP* 206-207). Thus, allowing the inevitability of change to transform the self imbues the “purification of the motive in the ground of our beseeching” with greater significance; For Eliot, the individual’s approach to his surroundings matters far more than the ability to change or affect them—dwelling firmly in the embodied present requires endurance rather than reform. The lines from Julian of Norwich nicely fit this

contention. She sees eternity and time on a continuum: “Here experience becomes a continuous unfolding in which eternity is seen to be on a continuum with time, not a discrete or completed action.”⁵⁵

In the last stanza of “Little Gidding” Section V, Eliot claims that the point of exploration is not to discover new places, but to instill an increasingly humble attitude into the self. As Eliot mentions in “East Coker,” “humility is endless.” Eliot contends that developing humility enables humanity to perceive the timeless within time, and dwell in the present—to attempt to perceive the meaning in time. Unlike much of Eliot’s earlier poetry and prose, in which he advocates escaping from time and emotion—“Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion”⁵⁶—here Eliot articulates an embrace of them that does not overwhelm, but instead accepts experiences such as despair and love as inevitable. The end of exploration is the ability to be firmly present within each moment: “We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time” (*CP* 208). Here, Eliot suggests that the purpose of exploration is not to discover new places, but to learn how to be fully engrossed in each moment, to accept that “Every poem is an epitaph” (*CP* 208); this assertion manifests Eliot’s earlier maxim: ““on whatever sphere of being / The mind of a man may be intent / At the time of death”...(And the time of death is every moment)” (*CP* 197). However, as opposed to the people described in “The Dry Salvages,” he lives in the moment now without allowing “subsequent attrition” to divert his focus away from it. The poet not only

⁵⁵Susan McCaslin. “Vision and Revision in Four Quartets: T.S. Eliot and Julian of Norwich.” *Mystics Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (December 1986), pp. 171-178. 172.

⁵⁶T.S. Eliot. *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1967. 158.

accepts the inevitability of agony, but he also embraces agony as something revitalizing: “Who then devised the torment? Love” (*CP* 207).

In the last stanza of “Little Gidding” V, Eliot forges a connection between the present and timelessness with the physical location of the poet, thereby heightening attention to the physical space the poet occupies and enabling him to hear the children’s laughter—the very experience the thrush denies him in “Burnt Norton.” In this moment of now, here, and always, the individual finally recognizes the necessity of hearing the children’s laughter: it represents the innocent embrace of life, as well as the pain of nostalgia—the potential for further heartache when one reflects on such warm past experiences that are no longer present or perfectly re-creatable. It is “The bitter apple and the bite in the apple.” The resurfacing of the children’s laughter suggests that humankind must embrace the reality that the thrush in “Burnt Norton” assures the poet is too difficult to bear. Additionally, Eliot identifies the laughter faintly emerging “in the stillness / Between two waves of the sea” (*CP* 209). In “The Dry Salvages,” the sea represents connection between all people, including both the living and the dead: it offers sustenance to “those / Whose business has to do with fish” (*CP* 197), as “The shattered lobsterpot, the broken oar / And the gear of foreign dead men (*CP* 192).” He deliberately sets the laughter within the confines of this connection throughout centuries. The poet now knows that he cannot re-enter his memory in an attempt to easily procure meaning from it. He can simply exist in a state of openness to experiencing the children’s laughter, accepting joy and agony alike when they surface. In the final section of the last quartet, Eliot only includes the children’s laughter from the scene in Section I of the first quartet. In “Little Gidding” V, the poet does not mention the thrush, dry pool, or the

unseen figures from the initial memory. Instead of attempting to re-enter the garden searching for sharper recognition of the details of the memory, the poet now approaches his memories in the same way that he approaches new experiences: in a state of receptivity to love and pain in each successive moment. Thus, while the poet does not re-enter the garden “Through the unknown, remembered gate,” in which “The voice of the hidden waterfall / And the children in the apple-tree” were “Not known, because not looked for,” he recognizes that the only moment in the memory worth preserving is the one that fosters greater engrossment with the present and reforms an individual’s character through an emotional, and potentially painful, experience focused “here,” in the poet’s present.

The last eight lines of *Four Quartets* reiterate the need to accept suffering in order to affirm life. The line “Quick now, here, now, always” applies to the entirety of the last stanza of “Little Gidding,” however, it begins the poem’s very last sentence. Thus, while it grounds the preceding lines in the present, it serves the same function for the following seven lines. Thus, within the immediacy of “here” and “now,” Eliot declares: “A condition of complete simplicity / (Costing not less than everything) / And all shall be well and / All manner of thing shall be well / When the tongues of flame are in-folded / Into the crowned knot of fire / And the fire and the rose are one” (CP 209). The poet restates the need for complete selflessness that requires constant purification from the part-pentecostal, part-purgatorial fire that burns off any knowledge that “imposes a pattern, and falsifies” (CP 185). Such purification allows the novelty of each moment to impress its unique set of experiences upon an individual. The “crowned knot of fire” recalls the only other time in *Four Quartets* where Eliot uses the word “crown:” when the

dead master “sets a crown upon his lifetime’s effort” by stripping away successes in order to avoid arrogance and complacency. The crown of fire mentioned at the end of “Little Gidding” also prevents clinging to such past successes and experiences. Additionally, “tongues of flame” recalls the moment of Pentecost, in which the Book of Acts 2:3-4 records that Jesus’ disciples “saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them,” enabling them to “speak in other tongues,” thereby being able to converse with people across different languages. Also, in Section I of “Little Gidding” Eliot claims “the communication of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.” Thus, in the final lines of *Four Quartets*, Eliot gathers together both the living and the dead into the “crowned knot of fire,” indicating that both time and timelessness converge on the present, the moment in which one recognizes the necessary unification between purifying fire and the value of experience. As McCaslin asserts, the poem’s final “affirmation is hard won and evolves out of the struggle of the many voices and moods in Eliot’s poem.”⁵⁷ In the midst of the German bombing of London, Eliot echoes the lines of Julian of Norwich, declaring that “all shall be well” once one perceives such a violent, deadly experience through the lens of endurance, affirming that “A people without history / Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern / of timeless moments” (CP 208), which could be recast as “a people without suffering is not redeemed from time.” In the final line, “the fire” symbolizes connection and purification, while “the rose” represents the capacity of memory and experience to facilitate the reformation of character. The unification of these two themes constitutes the intersection of time and timelessness, in which an individual recognizes that “history is a pattern / Of timeless moments” (CP 208). Within these moments, Eliot claims that one must learn to

⁵⁷ McCaslin, “Vision and Revision,” 176.

accept the inevitability of suffering, in order to remain engrossed, intent, with one's surroundings. Such engrossment enables the affirmation of life.

Conclusion

While I have traced the same affirmative thread running through “Auroras” and *Four Quartets*, Stevens and Eliot generally do not inhabit the same critical space. The former believes the idea of God constitutes the highest poetic achievement: “After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life’s redemption.”⁵⁸ The latter converted to Anglicanism at the age of 38. As Stevens demonstrates throughout “The Auroras of Autumn,” he avoids the metaphysical, trying to mitigate its effects, which he considers deleterious to a genuinely imaginative society. Over the course of his career, Stevens adjusts his poetry to reflect different emphases—in his early work, he exalts the imagination; in his middle period, he recovers the bareness of reality; in his later poetry, Stevens strikes a balance between the two. However, he demonstrates remarkable consistency regarding his views on the value of metaphysical beliefs: for him, they had little to none. By itself, the earth inspires his affirmation of life. In contrast, Eliot articulates throughout *Four Quartets* that timelessness—the realm of God—undergirds all of time. Timelessness becomes a foundational belief for him. However, even in his earlier poetry, before his conversion, he expresses profound desperation. In “Preludes,” Eliot extends one of his more dire pronouncements, saying: “Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh; / The worlds revolve like ancient women / Gathering fuel in vacant lots” (CP 15). Eliot packs strident cynicism into the lines through laughter and the harsh movement of the hand across the face. He also generates such a powerful image of pointlessness into the women’s presumably frequent task of “gathering fuel.” Perhaps most crucially, however, Stevens believes that the earth and all

⁵⁸ Wallace Stevens. *Opus Posthumous*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990. 185.

living entities begin life in a state of innocence. By *Four Quartets*, Eliot believes that humanity is born into a condition of depravity, of fallenness. It seemed that these poets were simply destined to have nothing common. However, in *Four Quartets* and “The Auroras of Autumn,” they inadvertently converge, like two diagonal lines that intersect before they continue running in different directions. Throughout the course of my research, I discovered a foundational connection between these two divergent poets: both emphasize the inevitability of change and death. However, they share another commonality, a deeper, more vital point of connection: both conclude that life is precious—that humanity should not only endure life, but celebrate it.

I am drawn to literature that urges its readers to continue broadening one’s experiences, and to do so in a rich, constructive manner—one that facilitates the flourishing not only of oneself, but also of others. Stevens affirms life by unearthing the basic innocence underlying the entirety of existence. By adopting the natural process of time, initiated simply by the turning of the earth, individuals accept constant change as the fundamental condition of all life. In doing so, they allow their own natural, innocent desires to emerge, finding new resemblances among objects of perception. Seeking these resemblances reinvigorates the individual, thereby preventing them from complacency, which for Stevens amounts to death: “We say of the moon, it is haunted by the man / Of bronze whose mind was made up and who, therefore, died” (*PM* 337). Eliot affirms life by marshalling all of the self’s resources into every successive instant. In *Four Quartets*, he claims that attempting to circumvent one’s circumstances—while certainly understandable given that Eliot’s context when writing most of *Four Quartets* was World War Two—truncates the self, thereby, ironically, emptying one’s ability to confront

suffering in a productive way. Ultimately, in my close readings of these two complex poems, I have tried to focus each line toward my goal of elucidating their affirmations. Hopefully, I have been able to find resemblances between these two seemingly dissimilar poets that will enable me to remain fully engrossed in each new moment.

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