

**The private conversion of a public man: Timeless presence and disparate linking  
in T.S. Eliot's poetry**

by

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## Abbreviations

AW	"Ash Wednesday"
BN	"Burnt Norton"
DS	"The Dry Salvages"
EC	"East Coker"
FQ	<i>Four Quartets</i>
GE	"Gerontion"
HM	"The Hollow Men"
KE	<i>Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley</i>
Letters 1	<i>The Letters of T.S. Eliot, vol.1</i>
Letters 2	<i>The Letters of T.S. Eliot, vol.2</i>
PR	"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"
T&T	"Tradition and the Individual Talent"
WL	<i>The Waste Land</i>

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is largely seen as the epitome of modernist thought and expression, and yet T.S. Eliot's life is enigmatic as a modernist voice considering his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism in June, 1927. His faith is expressed in few of his works but perhaps most present in the *Four Quartets*. I am interested in exploring the reasons for his conversion as expressed in his poetry, and the influences of his conversion on his poetry. My thesis will examine this transition in Eliot's life as expressed from *The Waste Land* (1921) to the *Four Quartets* (1942) which will act as two ends of a continuum.

In the text that follows, I survey Eliot's conversion not to evaluate its merit or sincerity, but to define it as a feature of his life that is in many ways at an inadequate stage of study. The impact of Eliot's conversion to Christianity in 1927 is still a point of contention among scholars. Eliot's struggle to "articulate his own theory of the distinct but related connections between literature, religion, and society" (Kearns 79-80) brought him to insist that "all writers must recognize something outside themselves to which they owed 'allegiance' and 'devotion'" or "something in the light of which sacrifices of idiosyncrasy, personality, and ideology might with justification be made" (Kearns 78). That Eliot lived by this creed is not an issue, but where Eliot's allegiance was directed, and what influences shaped this allegiance remains a large part of discussion today.

Eliot's conversion is at the center of his work as a writer and poet. According to Joseph Schwartz, "the failure to recognize the exact order of modifications and renewals in Eliot's thinking can be severely damaging to a critic's thesis" (215). Within Eliot's modifications and renewals, the positive and empowering role of faith in Eliot's life and

work has been largely dismissed by most scholars because Eliot, a voice of modernism, embodies an enigmatic return to tradition. If scholars choose to give focus to Eliot's conversion at all, they generally hold that it is overemphasized. Patrick Terrell Gray adds, "that something happened is agreed upon by all, but much ink continues to be spilled over *what* it actually did for Eliot the thinker and poet" (Gray 310). Through Eliot's writing, there is evidence to suggest that his conversion did a great deal more for Eliot than is recognized. Eliot's oeuvre is saturated not only with tradition but also with echoes, epiphanies, and tremors in anticipation of and resulting from his conversion.

My research will show the extent of pre-figuring in Eliot's writing prior to his conversion in 1927, and I will examine what Charles Schwartz identifies as the "pervasive counterpointing of past and present" (19). Though Schwartz applies this concept to Eliot's *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, I posit that Eliot's pre-conversion works pre-figure his conversion, and his post-conversion works act as a thoroughly modern expression of that conversion. Given this view, Eliot's conversion not only influences but dictates his poetic output both before and after it took place; Eliot's conversion allowed Eliot to re-negotiate and re-distribute themes of time and incarnation from before his conversion to after his conversion as apparent in his poetry.

One of the most influencing factors when interpreting Eliot's conversion is whether a scholar assumes Eliot's conversion is largely sincere or largely strategic. If Eliot's conversion was sincere, then the divergence between his pre-conversion and post-conversion pieces can be accounted for. However, there is a tendency to at least suspect that Eliot's conversion fulfilled his desire to place himself inside an authoritative tradition that he seemed to so highly admire. Of course, one can see Eliot's conversion as a

combination of sincerity and strategy, but largely leaning to one or the other will influence the way in which one interprets the troubling elements that surround Eliot's conversion. These elements are the lack of a private and personal account dealing with his conversion, his continuous social commentary with *The Idea of a Christian Society* as the *terminus ad quem*, and finally the seemingly polarized extremes between his two large works *The Waste Land* and the *Four Quartets*.

Because there is no autobiographical evidence to support whether Eliot's conversion was sincere or strategic, navigating through paradoxical parts of his conversion is largely left up to a scholar's discretion. Ironically so, it was Eliot who taught his readers the art of inferential explication, thus, reading Eliot's conversion through his own lens without any autobiography to tread through proves to be a difficult but possible task. Examining his own writing through the lens of his own timeline is sufficient to know the episodes and personalities involved in his conversion. Richard Shuchard persuasively adds that especially in Eliot's case, "If we cannot look to the biographer to explore and map the planes and intersections where life and art meet, then the job of constructing the interactive dynamic falls the biographical critic" (21). The fact that there is little autobiographical information about Eliot's conversion means that many puzzle pieces must come together to create a coherent reconstruction.

The role of the scholar, then, is to uncover how Eliot's conversion allowed him to redistribute and renegotiate matters of faith in his poetry. That Eliot's conversion existed is irrefutable. Though Eliot's sincerity or strategy—and any combination in between—may have valid room for argument, ultimately the evidence for the sincerity of his conversion, convictions, and overall solace found in religion is irrefutable. Even Eliot,

when describing his recent conversion to Paul More on August 9, 1929, wrote that rather than finally settling "in an easy chair" of belief and religion, he had rather "just begun a long journey afoot" (qtd. in Kramer 5). Thus, Kramer fittingly adds:

To experience [Eliot's] sensibilities with sympathy, then, one needs to realize that, for Eliot, religious tradition mattered because they addressed the deep and recurring longing within human beings for a redemptive, timeless presence. (5)

This longing for a redemptive, timeless presence is especially clear when looking at Eliot's use of time in the *Four Quartets*, Eliot's desire and seeming assurance—despite evidence—that the soul was immortal led him to religion. To Eliot, as he wrote in the introduction to Pascal's *Pensées*, every man "who thinks and lives by thought must have his own skepticism, that which stops at the questions, that which ends in denial, or that which leads to faith and is somehow integrated into a faith which transcends it" (xv). Thus, there is ample evidence to show that Eliot's conversion did a great deal more for him and for his work than scholarship tends to allot. This essay will identify and dissect two specific themes of Eliot's conversion found in his poetry: time and incarnation. These two themes have been identified in Eliot's work before in some capacity, yet there is little work on tracing Eliot's renegotiation and redistribution of these two themes from his pre-conversion work to his post-conversion work.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

For a number of years after Eliot's death, there remained for some time no written biography of his life or conversion. This, of course, is odd considering the amount of influence Eliot had on poetry in the 20th century, but James Olney contributes this lack to the fact that "Eliot declared that he wanted no *Life* written, and he inserted a clause to this effect in his will" (1). Yet, Olney distinguishes between "the deceptively simple word 'life' or '*Life*'" because he posits that "what Eliot was resisting, in one sense at least, was the transformation, effected by someone else, of his lower-case, uninitialized lived life into an upper-case, italicized, written *Life*" (1). In other words, Olney holds that scholars will look in vain to find the real T.S. Eliot in his *Life*, but rather the *real* Eliot can be found in the Poet he was "responsible for imagining, projecting, recalling, and writing" (4). One ought to look for the Poet that Eliot *provides* in his life and works. It is a reconstructed Eliot for which Olney suggests we search because the Eliot we know is the Eliot he put forth in his poetry. Of course, this presents a problem when looking at the plurality of Eliot's emotions as they manifest themselves in a singular poem. Eliot often discusses his conversion in a disorderly manner, and he tends to imply rather than state. Eliot is anything but direct.

While certainly one ought to distinguish between "the emotions which are in the experience which is one's material and the emotion in writing" (Eliot's Letters 140), it is the man that writes the poetry. Thus, there is often a certain personal element missing in between the transition from the plural emotions of Eliot's conversion and the singular emotion of Eliot's poetry. In other words, scholarship on Eliot's plurality often settles itself among his own depersonalized, constructed self. And even then, scholars have

trouble knowing which of Eliot's constructions to settle on—there is the philosophical Eliot, the poetic Eliot, the thoroughly modern Eliot, the cultural elitist Eliot, and, most confusing of them all, the religious Eliot. Interpretation of Eliot's work can become a juggling act where one "Eliot" is used as a lens to interpret another, and the many emotions of Eliot's experience turn into a chimeric or paradoxical view of his being.

While reconciling each categorical facet of Eliot's scholarship, poetry, and prose is an almost impossible feat, I do propose that Eliot's conversion is the final coda for two reoccurring themes that constantly haunt Eliot's work: time and incarnation. Eliot's life is sometimes treated as a single song with disharmonious chords rather than a medley with distinct, often disparate, movements. Thus, one common tendency when dealing with Eliot's conversion is to interpret Eliot's later work through his earlier epistemological beliefs found in his dissertation.

Happening upon Eliot's dissertation by accident, Anne Bolgan found Eliot's dissertation, "Experience and the Objects of Knowledge in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley" (1916) in the Houghton Library of Harvard University in 1954. After tripping on the bottom two steps leading to the library's private stack of Eliot items, it was Eliot's dissertation that broke her fall. The discovery of Eliot's dissertation opened up a whole new realm of study which tended to treat Eliot as a direct disciple of Bradley. The former was seen through the latter, and thus, Eliot was seen as having applied Bradley's philosophy to literature— even his post-conversion work. For example, Kristian Smidt writes, " His entire poetical output may be regarded, if one chooses, as a quest for knowledge—not necessarily of a rational kind—and one frequently recognizes in it Bradley's ideas in poetic costume" (qtd. in Childs 4). Even when noting Bradley's

influence on Eliot's work and later conversion, E.P. Bollier concluded that perhaps "Bradley was Eliot's Dante in leading him to the Christian form of doubt" (qtd. in Childs 4). After all, Eliot agreed with Bradley in that "the ideal, which is ostensibly subjective, and the real, which is ostensibly objective, are both constructions after the fact of immediate experience, which is itself beyond inspection" (Childs 4). Thus, most scholars view Eliot's impersonal view of poetry, ideas of the objective correlative, and the dissociation of senses to be a poetic outpouring of Bradley's philosophy.

Many have maintained that Bradley's philosophy is fundamental in understanding Eliot's work. Eliot's career follows his study of Bradley quite directly and Eliot himself recognized an influence of Bradley in his own prose style and poetry. Donald Childs, in his book *From Philosophy to Poetry: T.S. Eliot's Study of Knowledge and Experience*, handles Eliot's dissertation on Bradley with skill and precision, but then later attempts to interpret the *Four Quartets* through its lens. According to Childs, "The point of [Eliot's] dissertation is to argue that the assumption that the two points of view [knowledge and experience] are united in feeling or immediate experience is metaphysically false, or at least irrelevant" (147). Yet, it is from Eliot's dissertation that Childs concludes that the moments in the *Four Quartets* in which the human meets the divine are "what Eliot calls in his dissertation the subject side and the object side of human experience" (Childs 146). Childs assumes that "the reappearance of these two philosophies in the *Four Quartets* marks the reappearance there of Eliot's interest in the basic mysticism of human being" and the "dissertation's determination to resist the urge to resolve the subject-object dichotomy into oneness" (149). However, It is Eliot's initial belief in subject-object dichotomy—the fact that Eliot once wrote in his dissertation that there exists "a constant

transcendence of object into reference, and the absolutely objective is nowhere to be found" (KE 68)— that presents the most confusion when interpreting Eliot's conversion through the ideology found in his dissertation. Though few would hold that Eliot advocates solipsism, his belief that there is no real connection between the signifier and the signified and that without context no meaning exists is certainly hard to reconcile with his later belief in John 1:1. The point is that Eliot's conversion does mark a significant *alteration* of belief, and that using his early philosophical work to interpret his later poetic work is to extrapolate apples into oranges. It robs Eliot's poetic work of its true significance by reducing Eliot to a contradictory who strives after the wind in the name of success or literary tradition.

This is not to say that Bradley's influence on Eliot is irrelevant. As Childs posits, "it is difficult [...] to imagine a topic in Eliot studies to which the early work in philosophy would not be relevant in some way" (47). One can especially see Bradley's influence as Eliot deals with the past and considers it fluid rather than static. That Eliot's entire poetic output can be viewed as a quest for knowledge and true experience can be firmly established, yet Eliot draws conclusions in his dissertation about knowledge and experience that he comes to reject in a profound way through timeless presence and incarnation. Thus, Bolgan's claim that Eliot's dissertation is "the single most important document in understanding his theoretical criticism" is a lens through which, when interpreting his later conversion, produces an irrelevant, unfair, and contradictory view.

Other scholars have held that Eliot's faith was a very weak phenomenon and that it has been emphasized entirely too much. J. Bottum, associate editor of *First Things*, concludes that Eliot's public spirituality is "something like an exotic hothouse plant

forced to a small, unlikely bloom-over-cultivated, over-nursed, and over-watched" though he admits that "what passes in the human heart is known to God alone" (par. 1). In the end, Bottum posits that Eliot's contribution to faith was more aesthetic than genuine, and more shallow than life-encompassing. Those that hold this view generally use Eliot's adoration of tradition, characteristics of the High Church which Eliot joined, and the fact that Eliot's commentary on his own spirituality—apart from his poetry and some prose— was highly unsystematic and sparse.

Another scholar to hold Eliot's conversion as weak is Terry Eagleton who, looking through a poststructuralist marxist lens, saw Eliot's conversion as simply a plea for nostalgia, authority, and affirmation for his poetry. Using "Tradition and the Individual Talent" to interpret Eliot's conversion, Eagleton adds:

A literary work [according to Eliot] can be valid only by existing in the Tradition, as a Christian can be saved only by living in God [...] This, like divine grace, is an inscrutable affair: the Tradition, like the Almighty [...] sometimes withholds its favor from 'major' literary reputations and bestows it instead on some humble little text buried in the historical backwoods [...] Membership of the Tradition thus permits you to be at once authoritarian and self-abnegatingly humble, a combination which Eliot was later to find even more possible through membership of the Christian Church. (34-35)

To Eagleton, Eliot's idea of a 'classic' is "a work which springs from a structure of shared beliefs, but what these beliefs are is less important than the fact that they are shared" (44).

Thus, Eliot's conversion to the Anglican church simply shows his desire to align himself with shared beliefs that hold the most authority.

However, other scholars disagree with this assessment of Eliot because of the long-established nature of his goals far before his conversion. Gordon Wakefield, for example, posits:

[Eliot] could not have been other than a high Anglican, for this form of Christianity make it possible for him to aim for what he said in 1947[...] 'the highest goal of civilized man [ was] to unite the profoundest skepticism with the deepest faith.' (68)

Likewise, Richard Shusterman also rejects this notion because of both the nature of Eliot's conversion and what Eliot established from his conversion. Shusterman insists that:

Though [Eliot] recognized that literary criticism must ultimately lead into and be supplemented by moral, social, and religious criticism, [he] did not use his Christian faith as a device or foundation to provide incorrigible certainty or absolute objectivity for his or any possible critical system. (Qtd. in Gray 309-310)

Given the corpus of knowledge of Eliot's career, letters, and works that scholars now have, relatively few now question the overarching sincerity of Eliot's beliefs, though such questioning can still be found. However, present still and often piggy-backing a belief in Eliot's insincerity, is an Eliot that converted to Anglo-catholicism solely for political and readership purposes. Positing that the public dimension of Eliot's life is largely ignored, books like *The Ideology of the Four Quartets* by John Xiros Cooper

argue that Eliot's poetry, specifically the *Four Quartets*, is not merely a public display of a private spiritual life, but rather that Eliot adopted Christianity for strategic purposes—specifically political, elitist, and readership related. In sum, Cooper writes:

For Eliot, 1930 culminates a movement towards new personal and social allegiances. Such a transformation allows us to see the interaction of style, psychological disposition, and socio-political commitments as whole strategic activity. The voice of *Ash-Wednesday* [said to embody his conversion] has as much to do with Eliot's position as a publisher and businessman, or his opinions about the Tudor Church, Mallarmé and the Tory party as it has to do with his spiritual agonies or with the deliberate elimination of the social voices and mythic framework which characterize *The Waste Land*. (8)

Cooper posits that Eliot's conversion was one way in which Eliot could continue practicing the "discursive currencies" and Eliot was not "above spending [these currencies] to the limit" (Cooper 8). Thus, Eliot's god was not really God, but rather an insurance that his writing would find itself in the solid tradition discussed in his *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. His conversion was simply an attempt at "social mobility, because it was so disarming a gesture when respectability and social acceptance were the goals" (Cooper 9).

Those who see the *Political Eliot* agree with the *Insincere Eliot* in that officially converting to an orthodox denomination gave Eliot "a thoroughly historical social locus which neither the notion of myth nor the dehistoricized Hegel of Bradleyan idealism contained" (Eagleton, qtd. in Cooper 9). But Cooper and others also propose that unlike

*The Waste Land*, Eliot's more religious verses, aimed at the believer, were no longer designed to dethrone a hegemonic discourse. Cooper, reading Eliot's religious work, works from an assumption that, "there was never a time [save perhaps "The Elder Statesman"] when [Eliot] did not maintain a keen interest in the external social world" and that he constantly considered himself the "commentator, spokesman and impresario of certain social and cultural values which he promoted, increasingly publicly, after 1930" (Cooper 6). Thus, Eliot's conversion was just as important in reinforcing established social structures during a period of political tension and "in making the late style as is the inner turmoil" that may have let him to his conversion (Cooper 6).

In sum, some scholars like Cooper posit:

In a decisively non-modernist, even anti-modernist, maneuver, Eliot turned away from the central philosophical dilemma of the twentieth century. His Christian avowals in the mid-1920s, however, positioned him to re-enter authoritatively the metaphysical debate in the 1940s, during the general crisis of nihilism occasioned by the collapse of Europe. (Cooper 7-8)

For these politically-minded scholars, recent sympathy towards Eliot's inward life has overshadowed his other faces: "the public moralist, the drily aggressive controversialist, the contented social climber, and, above all, the successful London editor and publisher" (Cooper 6). Eliot's conversion is read through these personality traits and desires, and thus, Eliot's conversion is seen as too convenient, too publically overt, and too inwardly vacant.



Yet Eliot's conversion, if anything, brought him more grief from the public than readership, and the Anglican church at Eliot's time was not known to impose any political allegiance or alliance in its members. Born to an age of avant garde art, Eliot helped to create an environment where a rejection of faith and orthodoxy was a key tenet; part of Eliot's struggle to reconcile the spiritual void of modern times was that it was his early work which made the void so large. Eliot's conversion was anything but easy, and it left most friends and fans confused at best and infuriated at worst. For example, Ezra Pound, his longtime friend and immense helper while writing *The Waste Land*, responded to Eliot's conversion with the caustic couplet, "In any case, let us lament the psychosis/ Of all those who trade their muses for Moses" (qtd. in Kramer 4).

Another reaction to Eliot during his time came from George Orwell in 1942 who wrote a negative but sincere review of "Burnt Norton", "East Coker", and "Dry Salvages". Orwell questioned whether one could convert to an orthodox church without being intellectually crippled, and comparing an orthodox believer to an orthodox Stalinist, Orwell stated that both were unfree because "Christian churches still demand assent to doctrines which no one seriously believes in. The most case is the immortality of the soul" (86). Along with some scholars later to come, Orwell found Eliot's faith half-hearted, claiming that "neither feudalism nor indeed fascism is necessarily deadly to poets, though both are to prose-writers. The thing that is really deadly to both is Conservatism of the half-hearted modern kind" (87).

As Orwell illustrates, Eliot's conversion was both shocking and saddening to most readers and friends. Eliot's poetry before his conversion was largely known for its cynicism and, in some cases, even its nihilism. Bernard Bergonzi rightly points out that a

large reason Eliot's conversion was so shocking is that he was praised for just the opposite of established, religious belief.

Lastly, because Eliot contributed such a strong influence to the development of New Criticism, his conversion is, therefore, a bit at the whims of the poststructuralist theory that follows, and as David Chinitz points out, "the aspect of Eliot that poststructuralism suspects of unorthodoxy concerns his so-called 'mysticism'" (x). It is hard to define what each scholar means when they describe Eliot as mystical or as a mystic, but when discussing Eliot's spirituality, it is most often used in a contemptuous manner. Mystic or mystical can mean anything from spiritualism to occultism, but more importantly, it carries with it a lot of trouble for there is a few more entities in the poetic mix: perceived truth and an ultimate reality. One can see this in Eliot's preference of the minor poets of the major poets, for example. Because, as Chinitz adds, "minor poets are valuable because, whether they know it or not, they are orthodox" (x). In other words, in Eliot's mind, "[minor poets] are informed by *doxa*— true opinion, or right tradition" (Chinitz x) and this is understandably troubling for critiques that follow him. Eliot's seeming reinforcement of a powerful priesthood that guards the *logos* of the literary canon also reinforced a seeming tyranny that "repressed difference in favor of the same" (Chinitz xi).

Along with the label of a mystic comes a false dichotomy between T.S. Eliot's knowledge and the seemingly failure of Eliot's ability to reconcile that knowledge with his perceived experience. For many, Eliot's conversion was a last attempt at his perceived subject-object disparity from the early drop of the philosophy from his early dissertation. For example, in *T.S. Eliot: Mystic, Son, and Lover*, David Chinitz concludes that "Eliot

ever after articulated his sense that human knowledge and experience were epistemologically and metaphysically grounded in a mysticism" that was grounded "on one hand an inescapable belief in the reality shaped by the hermeneutic horizon into which we are projected" and on the other hand "a circumscribing skepticism required by knowledge that such reality is indeed the function of a hermeneutic system" (44). Chinitz also claims that "in mysticism, as in all things, the difference between real and ideal, object and subject, matter and value [is the] difference between points of view" (44) and he likely gets this idea from Eliot who wrote "our world, our reality, comes from a dialectic of opinion" (KE 165).

Furthermore, George Whiteside maintains that "Eliot hungered for but lacked a sense that all things form a whole. The hunger made him embrace Bradleian monism, but the lack kept him unconvinced of it. This absence of conviction can explain why Eliot eventually gave up monism. And the hunger can account for his subsequent participation in the Christian unity" (424) Most scholars cue their commentary on Eliot's mysticism from an interview that Eliot had with Françoise de Castro several years after he published the *Four Quartets*. When asked if "intellect and mysticism are two faculties that are opposed in human nature", Eliot answered, "All human faculties pushed to their limits end in mysticism" (144).

That Eliot never wrote an autobiography of any sorts has proven to be a source of profound conflict when deciphering his life experiences. Eliot provides no explicit reflection on the issues surrounding and influencing his conversion such as his wife's health, his affair, his poetic and financial successes and failures. More important than his life experience, Eliot never *overtly* documented his spiritual journey to the church and

what caused eventual rejection of ideas he held earlier in life—Eliot disliked the idea of being known by the public and for that, he felt no obligation to provide any personal justification or meaning of life to a public audience.

Thus, for our purposes, an Eliot mainly known through second-hand materials and published poetry and prose, is inevitable in some respects—one cannot escape certain levels of extrapolation, inferencing, and assuming. However, the road signs Eliot left are sufficient for an accurate, though difficult, account of his conversion.

### Chapter 3: T.S. Timeless Presence

It is common practice to often cite Eliot's preface to *For Lancelot Andrews* as the place in which his conversion was made public. Here, in 1928, Eliot wrote, "my present position[...] may be described as classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion" (ix) Though once described as a "skeptic with a taste for mysticism" (qtd. in Kramer 4), on June 29, 1927 Eliot officially joined the Church of England through the chaplain of Worcester College, William Force Stead. His wife, Vivienne, was not there on this quiet St. Peter's Day, and doors were closed and locked to insure privacy.

The Anglican Church required Eliot to be baptized before he could partake in full membership; he had not been baptized beforehand since his Unitarian upbringing did not require such sacraments. On Eliot's conversion, Barry Spurr points out:

Where 'conversion is misleading, with regard to Eliot's faith, is in its suggestion of those instantaneous events, as a result of which converts are changed utterly and a breach is made with their previous, unregenerate lives. They are 'born again'. This is where Anglo-Catholic tradition and Eliot's own spiritual experience part company from Protestant, evangelical ideas of conversion, about which (especially the emotional element, which can play a powerful role) he was deeply suspicious. (305)

The problem with viewing such a conversion is that it tends to diminish the importance of themes pervading Eliot's life experience before his baptism and confirmation. Further, because Eliot denied any evangelical form of conversion in his own life, he is not interested in converting his readers either. Spurr notes rather that "of paramount

importance, in religion, for Eliot, was 'the love of God and a sound Catholic doctrine' (307). He rejected the notion of the romantic, protestant notion of the inner voice. For Eliot, theology was:

The discipline of faith which the humanist and liberal Protestants had abrogated by divorcing themselves from this repository of impersonal wisdom of the ages to pin their hopes on spiritual whims and fancies. (307).

Thus, one large attraction to the Anglo-catholic high church was its rejection of undisciplined emotion. To him, spiritual deterioration due to emotional reliance was found least in this denomination.<sup>1</sup>

Previous to his official conversion, the many life experience and spiritual shifts in Eliot's life are numerous indeed, and it is even possible to trace Eliot's spiritual sensibilities back to his school days around 1910 and 11 when he wrote a poem called "Silence". Like *Prufrock*, "Preludes", and other poems, "Silence" opens with mention of a lifeless but busy city street. "Silence" discusses the "ultimate hour/ when life is justified" (8-9) and everyone in this world is "suddenly still" (13). Of this faceless, semi-divine encounter, Eliot says, "You may say what you will/ At such peace I am terrified/ There is nothing else beside" (14-16). Spiritually speaking, it is a sense of timelessness that

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<sup>1</sup> Though the Anglo-catholic theology gives some context to the way Eliot redistributes and renegotiates themes in his poetry after his conversion, delving into the specificities of this theology in relation to time and incarnation is perhaps too periphery for this thesis. Though we know without a doubt that Eliot intentionally converted to the Anglican church rather than any other denomination, the influence of church's theology is not made apparent in his *poetry*. This is not to say there is no influence there, but rather to say that such an extrapolation is outside the realm of this thesis's scope. However, one excellent resource for such a study can be found in Barry Spurr's "Anglo-Catholic in Religion: T.S. Eliot and Christianity."

terrifies Eliot. Timelessness, mixed with urban decay and a sickeningly silent stillness return in *Prufrock* as Eliot writes ten years later, "I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker/ And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker/ And in short, I was afraid" (84-86). The terror that an ultimate hour followed by timelessness elicits from Eliot is profound given his later work in the *Four Quartets*. Even recently, as quoted by David Chinitz, Lyndall Gordon noted that Eliot:

began to measure his life by the divine goal as far back as his student days, in 1920 and 1911, and that the turning point came not when he was baptized in 1927 but in 1914 when he first interested himself in the motives, the ordeals, and the achievements of saints. (xiii)

Even as early as 1910, Eliot's poetry represented flickers of a soul divided by optimistic, spiritual disillusionment and underlying moments of temporary dread that this world may come to an end and that a Footman may hold him accountable.

The years of 1910 and 1911 were vital for Eliot and he claimed them to be incontestable as he travelled abroad in Paris. Here he attended lectures and studied with French novelist and philosopher Alain-Fournier at Sorbonne. Much of his reading comprised the literature of Dostoevsky and the social realism of Henry James. At the Collège de France he met the influential and provoking French philosopher Henri Bergson and immersed himself in contemporary art, philosophy, and literature (Cuda 5).

Along with an internal dread of an eternal being, biographers suggest that his marriage to Vivienne Haigh-Wood determined a large amount of the shape that Eliot's conversion took and why he was so attracted to the Anglo-Catholic Church. Eliot met Vivienne, shortened to Vivien and commonly called Viv, during his one year study of

Aristotle at Merton College in Oxford. Viv was commonly described by those who knew her as "vivacious, romantic, self-conscious, and sharp-witted, a graceful dancer, a smart dresser, sensitive, [and] the embodiment of spontaneity" (Kramer 8). Married on June 26, 1915, Eliot's relationship with Viv began to disintegrate almost immediately. Soon discovering Viv's many mental and physical illnesses, Eliot began to sink into a depression while taking care of her increasingly severe addictions, sicknesses, and suicide attempts while teaching poorly paid classes for continuing education students.

Life experiences of this time left Eliot physically and emotionally drained, and lacking in finances. Bertrand Russell, renowned philosopher whom Eliot met at Harvard and Eliot's mentor at the time, had returned to America and made friends with the couple. Knowing that their finances were dwindling, Russell offered them a place to live in his London flat. Though this offer masked itself in kindness, this stay marked the beginning of an affair between Russell and Vivienne that would last for four years. Once the affair was made known, Eliot felt a sense of two betrayals—one from his wife and the other from his mentor and teacher. Thus began "the disgust and revulsion towards sex and the spirit of savage, biting satire that together pervade the poems composed during this period" (Cuda 6), the most notorious of them being *The Waste Land*.

In search of more financial stability, Eliot took a job in the Colonial and Foreign Departments at Lloyds Bank. Along with this, he taught evening classes for what would know be known as continuing education classes, and continued to be an assistant editor at *The Egoist* as well. Eliot remained with his wife during this time, but both of them influenced each other in a terribly negative way. Observed by scholar Anthony Cuda, "Eliot and his wife struggled as if they were locked in a cage together, each feeding off



the other's physical and nervous ailments in an alarming downward spiral" (7). Even Eliot himself wrote to his mother, "We feel sometimes as if we were going to pieces and just being patched up from time to time" (Letters 1 235). Eventually Eliot took three months sick leave after suffering from a nervous breakdown and, after resting for a while at a peaceful town in southern England named Margate, he sought a well-known psychologist named Roger Vittoz (Cuda 7).

Though, Eliot's *The Waste Land* shows his "refusal of omniscience admits multiple voices and incorporates jarring angles" (Brooker 53), the poem does not begin Eliot's dabbling with apparent contradiction such as the public made private and vice versa. Jewel Spears Brooker notes of T.S. Eliot that "beginning with his undergraduate writings, [he] shifted away from straightforward statements" (53). Works such as *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, a pre-conversion essay, display a resistance to binary thinking that comfortably finds profoundly new perspectives in traditional ideology— for example, the role of the individual artist who will inevitably situate himself within a large body of tradition. Early on, Eliot wrestled with the necessity of tradition and the invention of an individual writer, and he allowed himself to accept supposed opposites such as tradition and the individual. Even earlier than "Tradition and the Individual Talent", Eliot's dissertation – published in 1964— also shows that as a young poet and philosopher, Eliot was more "dialectic than dogmatic, more inclined to Bradley's emphasis upon the limitations of conceptual knowledge than to his notion of the Absolute" (Schwartz 19). Thus, defending Eliot against paradox would be like reconciling two friends— Eliot has no qualms with apparent contradiction.

Thus, by the time of Eliot's conversion and the creation of the *Four Quartets*, Eliot's past tendency to embrace paradox and his theme of jarring two disparate images culminate into a dance of opposites that carry a strong support for Christian paradox. Eliot's comfort with paradox emanates in two distinct ways that echo his eventual conversion in 1927: time and the incarnation. Yet, more than this, Eliot presents his readers even with a meta-paradoxical aspect of his work because though there are such stark distinctions between his pre-conversion and post-conversion poetry, Eliot's awareness and even obsession with the flux of time and Eliot's desire for the incarnation remain constant.

Scholars of Eliot have often noted the time-haunted nature of Eliot's poetry. Found across the board in much of his pre- and post- conversion poetry, Eliot's conceptual revisions and renewals of time provide a fitting framework through which to view Eliot's religious journey. One can see the Eliot's pre-conversion work largely contain either questions of time or depressing or empty sentiments of time. Questions of time, for example, are found throughout *The Waste Land* especially in "A Game of Chess" as Eliot asks, "What shall I do now? What shall I do? [...] What shall we do tomorrow?/ What shall we ever do?" (131, 133-134). More than that, but Prufrock seems saturated with a belief that there will be "time yet for a hundred indecisions, and for a hundred visions and revisions" (31-32). The nature of so many revisions and visions make the solitary decision meaningless. Eliot's early poetry shows a certain futility of an existence bound by time. More shall be said on this point later, but the point for the moment is to note Kenneth Kramer's observation from his book *Redeeming Time*:

In the Ariel poems, the poet's voice, though still distracted by the temporal process, begins to evoke hints of a timeless design that, when directly experienced and then recalled with a disciplined imagination, temporarily releases him from being trapped in the temporal flux. (34)

When looking at the *Four Quartets*, thought to be the prime expression of Eliot's conversion, Kramer posits that the first ten lines of "Burnt Norton" "frame not only *Burnt Norton* but the entire *Four Quartets* in the context of time and timelessness" (33). The first ten lines read:

Time present and time past  
 Are both perhaps present in time future,  
 And time future contained in time past.  
 If all time is eternally present  
 All time is unredeemable.  
 What might have been is an abstraction  
 Remaining a perpetual possibility  
 Only in a world of speculation.  
 What might have been and what has been  
 Point to one end, which is always present. (1-10)

Between *Prufrock*, *The Waste Land*, and "Burnt Norton," one can see that even within these few examples, a large shift in conceptual thinking and application has taken place. Before Eliot's conversion, time was meaningless and overwhelming. Eliot's expression of time in his post-conversion work shows of post-relativity representations of time. By

asking no questions and making absolute statements of time, he is calm and straightforward in these verses.

Defining this shift becomes imperative if one is to fully understand Eliot's conversion and what it meant to him, simply because time and the incarnation of Christ are so deeply connected. Thus, when dealing with time, I would expand Kramer's argument and suggest that Eliot's conversion to the Anglican faith provides a *permanent* release from being trapped in the temporal flux, and that this is evident in more than just his Ariel poems. Though one cannot deny evidence of an inward groaning and struggle with time throughout Eliot's post-conversion work, these groans are death-tremors of a deep contentment found in a paradox of time through the incarnation of Christ.

Eliot's use and concept of time is crucial when reading his poetry, and it is Eliot's acute awareness and perhaps even obsession with the flux of time that allows the reader to appreciate the full range of moods and modes in his work. Sukhbir Singh, specifically looking at *The Waste Land*, adds that an awareness to Eliot's structure and treatment of time allows the reader further examine his poem's "thematic and structural significance by referring simultaneously to what has already taken place and to what might subsequently happen" (38). According to Singh, it is the hidden connections between Eliot's the coexistence of time past and time future within time present that "create a structural complexity and thematic ambiguity, which together generate multiple layers of meaning and promote unlimited possibilities of new interpretations" (38). For Eliot, time does not anchor the concepts found in his work specifically when dealing with his conversion both before it and after. Thus, in order to fully engage in Eliot's constant counterpointing of past and present that we see before and after his conversion—and

contradictingly so— his concept of time must first be an established scaffold.

Eliot's fascination with time can be found in his work as early as sixteen years of age. One of his early poems titled "Song" contains an adolescent curiosity and a small amount of mourning for the fluidity of time. It begins:

If Space and Time, as sages say,  
 Are things that cannot be,  
 The fly that lives a single day  
 Has lived as long as we.  
 But let us live while we may,  
 While love and life are free,  
 For time is time, and runs away,  
 Though sages disagree. (qtd. in Maddrey, 1-8)

What is noteworthy about this early poem is that, as Jitendra Sharma in her book *Time and T.S. Eliot* notes, Eliot treats time as a psychological phenomenon that can be challenged, but the reader's consciousness has not been probed deeply yet. It would not be until later in Eliot's career that he would launch a "duel between Time and Consciousness which would not end till its culmination in [...] the *Four Quartets* [when] the poet would declare that only through time time is conquered" (Sharma 7). Eliot's early work shows a fascination with time, but there is a youthful innocence to his wonderings and an acceptance that time is.

Eliot's interest in time remains the same throughout his work, yet his acceptance and innocent attitude towards time changes once Eliot returned from America in 1916. It was during this time that he discovered his wife Vivien's battle with chronic physical and

mental illness as well as the beginning of a long series of low-paying, stressful work. It was crisis that changed Eliot's observation of time—Eliot's psychological observation of time turned into a concrete realization that time moves even when life does not. Time does not stop. Cuda observes that "Eliot and his wife struggled as if they were locked in a cage together, each feeding off of the other's physical and nervous ailments in an alarming downward spiral" (Cuda 7). Eliot grew more and more aware that time passes even when moments seem to freeze, and it was during this seemingly crude relativity that Eliot began piecing together old poems that would eventually make up *The Waste Land*. As Cuda observes, though this poem is seemingly detached and elliptical, "many of the poem's spiritually vacuous personae are chilling echoes of Eliot's personal nightmare" (7).

Eliot's *The Waste Land* runs from April to Shantih which is Sanskrit for peace, understanding, and rest. Eliot translated this word to be a peace that passes understanding, and much of Ezra Pound's editing of the long poem made sure that this journey from April to Shantih took place. It was Pound who dissuaded Eliot from using "Gerontion", a poem that will be discussed later, as the introduction to *The Waste Land*, and Pound who also objected to Eliot's use of an epigraph from Joseph Conrad that read:

Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision,— he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath— "The horror! the horror!" (qtd, in Davidson, 121).

Though Eliot ultimately went with Pound's suggestion to use another quote, one can see

the appeal of Conrad here given Eliot's life situation at the time. Eliot's observations of time throughout *The Waste Land* are seen through a lens of dread as it slips away. Eliot eventually decided to use a passage from the *Satyricon* by Petronius. Like Conrad's passage, Petronius's character Sibyl wishes to escape her "living death of immortality through a real death" (Davidson 122)– a concept that is immediately revisited in the beginning of "The Burial of the Dead" as Eliot writes:

Winter kept us warm, covering  
 Earth in forgetful snow, feeding  
 A little life with dried tubers. (5-7)

Eliot's title "The Burial of the Dead" originates from the Anglican Book of Common Prayers for burying the dead—a service that is thick with imagery of resurrection throughout. As *The Waste Land* began with April, "The Burial of the Dead" returns to spring in which there is a little life in things that are dead. Here, Eliot expresses a desire for the death that Sibyl cannot handle. The Eliot who wrote *The Waste Land* is a man oppressed by death in life, thus, as Grover Smith observes, these are:

Scenes of both joy and agony, and in memory<sup>2</sup> they reveal that  
 consciousness is death and that truly the speaker was alive only when he  
 could forget. The death of winter and the life of spring usurp each other.  
 (71)

Eliot again expresses an anguish between two lives in the role of Tiresias in "The Fire Sermon" as he "lives between two worlds" (218).

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<sup>2</sup> Lines 5-7 of "The Burial of the Dead" come after a lilacs reference in which Eliot remembers his friend who was killed in the war, whom he had met up with one day at Luxemburg Gardens in Paris. His friend came to meet him carrying a branch of lilacs.

Though Eliot moves to the kind of high modernism that largely prefers spatial forms of time over constructed measures of time like April or winter, there is a certain dread of both that Eliot depicts. One particularly overt instance of this dread comes from "The Game of Chess" or part II of *The Waste Land*. Situated in a bar somewhere assumedly in London, Eliot writes the conversation of two women, one whose friend's husband is returning from war. Throughout the conversation, the pub owner repeats the phrase, "Hurry up please its time" throughout the lines of the conversation. The phrase is expressed more and more often until the women say goodbye to each other, signifying the end of the section. The phrase easily seems like a ticking clock that closes in on the women's shallow and pedantic conversation. Eliot creates a feeling of rushed, meaningless, and detached chatter that displays one major difference between Eliot's pre-conversion work and post-conversion work. Within *The Waste Land*, time means eventual, meaningless death even when time does not mean progress; there is a unique and haunting dread of this fact in Eliot's pre-conversion work that one cannot find in his post-conversion work.

However, both before and after his conversion, for Eliot, "Time present and time past/are both perhaps present in time future, And time future contained in time past" (Burnt Norton 1.1-2). For Eliot, time, like the soul, is non-material— and they are both utterly entwined in life experiences. Eliot does not speak of time in a linear fashion, but rather, time is an ever-waiting, ever-obscure, presence or reality that is just beyond his reach and this concept is seen throughout his work both before and after his conversion. For example, "Ash Wednesday", a piece seen as embodying Eliot's conversion, begins by saying, "Because I know that time is always time/ And place is always and only place/



And what is actual is actual only for one time/ And only for one place" (1-4). This same concept, the presence of the past, is seen much earlier in Eliot's work as well. For example, within *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, the notion of time permeates existence not in a chronological sense, but in an ever-present sense. Eliot posits that "the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence" (par.3). Taken as a whole, the two parts of Tradition and the Individual Talent also speak to the "pervasive counterpointing of past and present" (Schwartz 19) within Eliot's work.

In fact, though *Tradition and the Individual Talent* is a prose piece and not poetry, the philosophy of Eliot's notion of time is largely influential if seen as a time-related lens. To this day, scholarship continues to debate a whole host of issues raised by this piece; its place within the modernist movement, the apparent polarized nature between its two parts- tradition and the individual- and, perhaps most important, "its relationship to Eliot's own poetic output both before and after it appeared" (Schwartz 16). Schwartz adds that the critics of Eliot's day "[teased] out the discrepancies between the self-declared 'classicist' and the closet 'romantic' whose works attest to the very aesthetic he sought to supersede" (19). During its own time, and with the decline of New Historicism, critics found it tempting to perceive tradition and the individual talent as diametrically opposed entities. However, to Eliot, they were dear friends. According to Eliot, tradition embodies the idea of a lost order, or a "set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion" (Hamlet and his problems par.8). In paragraph 4 of *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, Eliot says that "the existing monuments [of all preceding art] form an ideal order among themselves, which is

modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them.” What Eliot meant by an *ideal order* suggests a belief in an undying and authoritative tradition that has just as much influence on the present as its current conception has on the past; historical knowledge is relative. In this way, the past is elusive and undefined. Thus, according to Eliot, our concept of the past constantly changes as time moves on.

Eliot’s main point in the first part of his essay is one of time and influence. He begins with a critique of “our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else” (T&IT par.2). We as critics tend to note where poets have deviated from the past, specifically the most recent past, and we praise their individualism. Eliot rejects this notion of criticism claiming that “no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone” (T&IT par.3). Thus, “what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it” (T&IT par.4).

*Tradition and the Individual Talent*, written in 1921, is a monumental piece when considering Eliot's conception not only of time, but also of man and his own context. Just as no one can stand outside of their context or their preceding tradition, no one can stand outside of time or this earth either. The artist is never outside of his own context and artist's context, the past, or tradition, is an ever-present, ever-changing influence. In other words, the present shapes our comprehension of the past as much as the past influences our understanding of the present, and this is exactly what we find in "Ash Wednesday", published in 1930, as well.

Not only can one find the same notion of time in *Tradition and the Individual Talent* and in "Ash Wednesday", but *The Waste Land* shares the same concern and

exploration of the ever-present influence of the past. Scholar Sukhbir Singh notes that Eliot's use of use of linguistical modes, especially semantics, mirrors his own understanding and application of time, and Singh draws specific attention to Eliot's use of the word "cross" which has both a haphazard and religious connotation. Quoting the opening lines of "The Fire Sermon", Singh points out that Eliot's use of the word cross has a number of connotations "of which at least four conform to Eliot's mystical concept of time" as they "carry us back and forth throughout the narrative to reinforce the various themes of infertility in *The Waste Land*" (35).

The word "cross" which Singh references comes from lines 173 to 175 of Eliot's "The Fire Sermon" which say:

The river's tent is broken; the last fingers of leaf  
clutch and sing the wet bank. The wind

Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed.

Of course, the word "cross" has a great many meanings such as "to meet someone in passing", "to displease of anger another person by disobeying or deceiving", "to mate one breed of animals or plants with another for producing a hybrid, improved variety", and finally "to make a sign of the cross over oneself or others as an act of reverence to Jesus Christ" (Singh 35-37).

On the surface, *The Waste Land* is presents a stark contrast to Eliot's post conversion works in that *The Waste Land* is disconnected, points more to problems than solutions, and carries a subtle sense of hopelessness in it— comparing the cross, and infertility to the shallowness of human relationships, for example. Though these contrasts

between post conversion work and work such as *The Waste Land* are certainly present, there still remains an insistence of time and its elusive nature.

Of Eliot's 1920 poems, "Gerontion" is perhaps best representative of his early conceptualization of time. At first, Eliot considered using the poem as a preface for *The Waste Land*, but eventually decided to keep the poem as a separate piece. "Gerontion" contains a dramatic monologue of an old man or a *gerontic* set in post-World War I Europe. The epigraph of the poem begins with a state of timelessness as Eliot writes, "Thou hast nor youth nor age/ But as it were an after dinner sleep/ Dreaming of both" (GE epigraph). Right away, Eliot puts forth what will be a running theme in his work: the penetrating counterpointing of the past and the present. After the epigraph, the decrepit character of Eliot's poem indicates that a young boy currently reads to him. Thus, after Eliot establishes a state of timelessness, we are thrust into a single moment in time and about time. The old man is waiting for rain— a form of renewal— in "a dry month" (1). Whether the boy waits for rain as well is left ambiguous in the poem, but Eliot indicates that the old man is in special need for his house is decaying and his animals seem sick as well. There is an empty helplessness that seems to surround the old man as he says, "I an old man/ A dull head among windy spaces" (15-16).

Even in these small, beginning portions of "Gerontion," one finds a shocking amount of similarities between the themes of time and place between this poem and portions of the *Four Quartets*— poems that span nearly twenty-five years of time. One prominent similarity between "Gerontion" and "East Coker" is that Eliot ends "East Coker" the way he began "Gerontion". Part 5 of "East Coker," Eliot's final installment to the poem, begins with a specific reference to time as well. Within "East Coker," this

section is the beginning of the end of the poem, and, like "Gerontion," it covers both past and present. Furthermore, both "Gerontion" and "East Coker" begin in paradox. Eliot begins and ends "East Coker," the fourth and most overtly religious movement of the *Four Quartets*, with the fitting paradox "In my beginning is my end" (1.1) and, without a doubt, he references the French composition "Ma Fin Est Mon Commencement" by Guillaume de Machaut. Machaut begins his movement similarly through a musical palindrome. Such musical movements that contained a cyclical rhythm were common during Eliot's time, but the genius of Machaut's movement is that every aspect—the notes, rhythm, and lyrics—retraces its steps starting at the midpoint of the song. Such repetition communicates that what has been is what shall be, and what will be is that which is. Eliot's most overtly religious section of his post-conversion *chef d'oeuvre* is saturated with paradox.

In the beginning of Part 5 of East Coker, Eliot writes, "So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years/ Twenty years largely wasted, the years of l'entre deux guerres" (4.1-2). Eliot's use of *here* cues the reader of where "the light falls/ Across the open field" (1.14-15) and where "in a warm haze the sultry light is absorbed" (1.20-21)—to a place governed by time. Eliot also uses the word *here* as the first word in "Gerontion". In both poems, Eliot yanks the reader between specific points of *here* and the timeless nature of *there*.

In the part V of "East Coker," Eliot highlights the jerk he feels between time and timelessness by donning the years that have passed as the years of l'entre deux guerres. This phrase is a French phrase meaning "between the wars" and usually refers to the years between World War I and World War II, but in this case, they also take on the

connotation of *here* and *there* or now and eternity. The phrase "between the wars" also held a sense of waiting for a dreaded inevitable as people foresaw the coming of another war as early as the 1920s. Eliot, writing this section of "East Coker" around 1943, draws attention to the cyclical nature of war as well as life and death, and the epigraph of "Gerontion" echoes this concept fully as well. Though the reader is told they "hast nor youth nor age/ But as it were an after dinner sleep" (GE Epigraph), the reader is then yanked into the *here* of the speaker.

In "East Coker," Eliot obliquely points to Ecclesiastes 3:2-8 where Solomon posits that "there is a time for everything,/ and a season for every activity under the heavens" (Ecc 3:1). Eliot writes that "Houses live and die; there is a time for building and a time for living" (1.9-10). There is juxtaposition of two views of time as Eliot references Ecclesiastes and then deviates from it: a linear view of time and a cyclical view of time. Ecclesiastes holds to a cyclical view of time where "nothing new is under the sun" (Ecc. 1:9). As Solomon mentions the living, dying, planting, killing, tearing, mourning, scattering, embracing, etc. *of people*, Eliot only mentions building, living, and generating, and the focus is that of industry and the creation of buildings. Between lines 9-13, buildings have far more agency than man. Thus, Eliot seems to portray that only buildings are tied to time in this beginning stanza. Furthermore, Eliot uses the passive voice to describe even more action that happens to the house which distances the reader from earth's activities even more. For all we know, the wind could have been most involved in the removal, destruction, and extension of houses. The focus of East Coker's first stanza is of outside forces and cycles from which man is very detached and yet

highly involved. As a reader, our only context is that of here, earth, and yet Eliot treats man as a foreigner.

While man is detached from the decay described in "East Coker," "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," a pre-conversion poem published in 1920, tells a different tale. Beginning Prufrock with the line, "Let us go then you and I" (1), Eliot speaks to the reader directly and the reader is deeply involved in the poem because of it. Starting in line 25 of Prufrock, like "East Coker," Eliot echoes Ecclesiastes as he writes:

There will be time, there will be time  
 To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;  
 There will be time to murder and create,  
 And time for all the works and days of hands  
 That lift and drop a question on your plate;  
 Time for you and time for me,  
 And time yet for a hundred indecisions,  
 And for a hundred visions and revisions,  
 Before the taking of a toast and tea. (25-33)

Eliot's application of time in Prufrock shows a recognition that an infinite amount of time may reside even in one minute— a minute is a very important thing. In a minute there is time for "decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse" (PR 48). Just as Eliot brings our attention to the particular, he jerks us back to the retrospective and draws attention to the cyclical nature of time once more. Right after discussion the finite minute, he states:

For I have known them all already, known them all:

Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,  
 I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;  
 I know the voices dying with a dying fall  
 Beneath the music from a farther room. (PR 49-53)

That Eliot has "measured out [his] life in coffee spoons" (PR 51) shows how nonchalant the speaker feels about time and its constant passing. Though Eliot's poem shows a fear that "if all time is eternally present/ All time is unredeemable" (BN 4-5).

The modernity of Prufrock with its disillusioned apathy has disappeared over time. Jaspers, in his book *Man in the Modern Age*, insisted that "no one can transcend the limitations of his epoch", yet in Eliot's life, one can see that at least from Eliot's perspective, he is eventually introduced to Someone who did. From these numerous examples, one can see that Eliot's oeuvre is saturated not only with tradition but also with echoes, epiphanies, and tremors in anticipation of and resulting from his conversion, and yet he is thoroughly modern through it all. Eliot's conversion completes his own application of the cyclical and paradoxical nature of time. In a sense, he fulfills his own prophecy as he nestles himself as an individual among tradition—yet the tradition he finds is full of life and timelessness. He finds a faith that allows him to kiss the divide between two disparate entities.



## Chapter 4: Disparate Linking

In his essay "The Pensées of Pascal" (1931), Eliot gives a vivid account of his conversion as he came to understand it:

The Christian thinker— and I mean the man who is trying consciously and conscientiously to explain to himself the sequence which culminates in faith, rather than the public apologist— proceeds by rejection and elimination. He finds the world to be so and so; he finds its characters inexplicably by the non-religious theory: among religions he finds Christianity, and Catholic Christianity, to account most satisfactory for the world and especially for the moral world within it; and thus, [...] he finds himself inexorably committed to the dogma of incarnation. (qtd. in Bergonzi 112)

Here, Eliot puts forth that out of all Christian themes and doctrines, it is incarnation that draws him the most, and one certainly finds this vivid attraction to incarnation in his poetry as well.

Though the *Four Quartets* and some other works put forth a large discussion on the Christian form of incarnation, Eliot's use of incarnation also harkens to the broader sense of a linking of two disparate entities. This chapter will give a survey of divergent themes that Eliot attempts to connect within his poetry, and end with Eliot's ultimate resolve with and satisfaction in the Chalcedonian application of Incarnation which linked man and the divine.

Time, for Eliot, becomes a way to measure eternity. Likewise, the incarnation represents a divine disruption of time that gives existence a bridge between time and

timelessness or *here* and *there*. Eliot is gripped by the paradoxical intersection of time and timelessness because, for him, it holds life without death. Thus, the incarnation, especially its application of time, is key for Eliot. Without the eventual Chalcedonian application of incarnation at work in his poetry, Eliot's return to tradition is robbed of its true significance and is simply seen as contradictory. Eliot's entire poetic career shows a longing for an instrument through which he can connect the many dissimilar themes that saturate his thoughts and therefore poetry. Eliot's eventual rest in the Chalcedonian form of incarnation, therefore, provides a resolution of and not a divergence from his work.

Patrick Terrell Gray posits a working definition of Eliot's *incarnation* as:

The *pattern* by which one is able to grasp the whole, and actually makes it possible to truly *see* the parts as they are meant to be, which is in relation to each other. (311)

One can see that in and of itself, this definition is lacking a direct religious sentiment though he takes this definition from Eliot who once wrote in his "Notes towards the Definition of Culture":

I spoke at one point of the culture of a people as an *incarnation* of its religion; and while I am aware of the temerity of employing such an exalted term, I cannot think of any other which would convey to well the intention to avoid *relation* on the one hand and *identification* on the other.

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Thus, incarnation, when applied to the entirety of Eliot's work, is a dynamic way to connect entities with apparent contradictions. Yet, though the theme of disparate entities runs throughout Eliot's poetry, he does not always find an incarnation or linking for them.

Because of this, Eliot shows his desire to link disparate and even paradoxical themes has been steadfast throughout his career, yet this desire is not fully met until he comes to faith. Before examining Eliot's post-conversion work, I will examine the attempt at incarnation in three of Eliot's pre-conversion work: "The Hollow Men," "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock," and "Gerontion."

Disparate entities haunt Eliot's poetry both before and after his conversion, but perhaps the poem most lush with disparate entities is "The Hollow Men" written in 1925. These entities are never connected; they are never linked because of a shadow. In "The Hollow Men," Eliot writes:

Between the idea  
 And the reality  
 Between the motion  
 And the act.  
 Between the conception  
 And the creation  
 Between the emotion  
 And the response. (72-75, 78-80)

Finally, a shadow falls:

Between the desire  
 And the spasm  
 Between the potency  
 And the existence  
 Between the essence

And the descent. (84-89)

Of course, the image of a separating shadow is pregnant with meaning. A shadow is nothing and yet entirely terrifying at times. J. Hillis Miller suggests that the shadow that falls between these entities "is the paralysis which seizes men who live in a completely subjective world" (181). In other words, "it is revealed to be the Shadow which isolates things from one another, reduces them to abstraction, and makes movement, feeling, and creativity impossible" (Miller 181). Ironically enough, here the shadow is an abstraction that is made concrete. The hollow men live lives that are backwards; they are not as they were made to be. "The Hollow Men" speaks of the debasement of a life that grasps for abstraction and ends only in a whimper. There is no substance here, only "shape without form, shade without colour, paralysed force, gesture without motion" (HM 1.12-13). It is a shadow, a clear separation of nothingness, that separates disparate entities in this work.

"The Hollow Men," is one of the last poems published before Eliot's official conversion. It shows a climax of struggle in Eliot's faith that provides the final coda to his journey. What is important to note about Eliot's "The Hollow Men" is that it begins to make a distinction between *here* and *there*, yet unlike Eliot's writing in the *Four Quartets*<sup>3</sup> there is no connection between the two. What is more important to note here is that this "The Hollow Men" begins to discuss these two entities (here and there) as spiritually significant. Within Eliot's work, *here* and *there* are the ultimate connection that incarnation makes possible for Eliot. *Here* is bound by time and *there* refers to "Death's dream Kingdom" (HM 20) or the afterlife which is wrapped in timelessness.

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<sup>3</sup> The *here* and *there* of the *Four Quartets* have already been discussed on page 40 and will be discussed again on page 59 .

There is no incarnation to link *here* and *there*, time and timelessness, abstraction and substance. These entities are separated by shadow and their separation is final.

Another highly interesting dissimilar pairing in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915) is that of connection and isolation. Of "Prufrock," Gray observes that "there is a sense throughout the entire poem that life is a series of monotonous indecisions and missed opportunities" (317) and Frances Dickey adds that "the image of the etherized patient hovers over the entire poem as an emblem of Prufrock's numbness and his inability to take action" (123). Right away, "Prufrock" is enigmatic as it begins with The vague destination coupled with the uncertainty of to whom he speaks. The famous lines begin:

Let us go then, you and I,  
 When the evening is spread out against the sky  
 Like a patient etherized upon a table (1-3)

Not only is the reader unsure of the "where" and the "who" of the poem, but the "when" of the poem is enigmatic as well. Though we know the month is October, Eliot shifts tense throughout the poem, and it is clear that the speaker wants to depart from his location at twilight: a thoroughly liminal space favored by the French Symbolists.

Prufrock's fear and feeling of isolation are especially strong starting on line 37 which reads:

And indeed there will be time  
 To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"  
 Time to turn back and descend the stair,  
 With a bald spot in the middle of my hair—

(They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!") 37-41

With these insecurities, Prufrock wonders, "Do I dare/ Disturb the universe?" (45-46).

Prufrock elucidates his fear as he says:

And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
 When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
 Then how should I begin  
 To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways? (57-60)

Here the speaker shows fears connection because connection means exposure. However, there is a sense that eventually Prufrock wants to connect, but he tells himself that there will be time for that later. Prufrock is isolated because he fears exposure; he fears to be poked and prodded like a pinned bug. However, in the second half of the poem, Prufrock again shows a strong desire to communicate as he says:

It is impossible to say just what I mean!  
 But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:  
 Would it have been worth while  
 If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,  
 And turning toward the window, should say:  
 "That is not it at all,  
 That is not what I meant, at all." (104-110)

Prufrock's frustration to express what he means coupled with the consistent dialogue between Prufrock and the reader again show Prufrock's strong desire to communicate though he is crippled by a fear of connection.

The linking of these two emotions comes in the form of death for Prufrock. Towards the end of the poem, Prufrock shows a fear of growing old. He speaks of mermaids singing and says, "I do not think they will sing to me" (125). Earlier in the poem, Prufrock says, "I should have been a pair of ragged claws/ Scuttling across the floors of silent seas" (73-74). Finally, Prufrock ends with:

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea  
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown  
Till human voices wake us, and we drown. (129-131)

Of this death, Dickey observes that "Prufrock has nothing to assure him of his own and the world's solidarity, which may explain why we find him drowning at the end of the poem" (124).

Morris Weitz fittingly adds:

We etherized patients, who live in our limbo-like trance of doing nothing, have been near the sources of salvation: we will remain there until we cease our state of mere physical existence, of 'death-in-life,' and attain our spiritual rebirth, our 'life in death.' (144)

The main distinction between Eliot's pre-conversion Prufrock and his post-conversion work is that only the Chalcedonian form of incarnation brings "life in death." Weitz adds:

The whole of 'Prufrock' is the struggle to emancipate ourselves from the acceptance of the ultimate character of false time and to recognize instead that which is *within* our temporal experiences as their ultimate moment, the overwhelming question.

In other words, though Eliot does not hold our current state of flux as ultimate reality, it is in fact a reality given its backdrop of eternal timelessness. Time is given context by timelessness, and time is grounded by timelessness. Yet there is a part of Eliot's pre-conversion poetry that longs to get at timelessness. Eliot's poetry hints a Chalcedonian incarnation to unite these disparate entities, but it is not until the *Four Quartets* that his connection of time and timelessness, of *here* and *there*, and of life and death are fully worked out in poetic terms.

However, there is a timelessness of sorts that Eliot writes in this poem, but the incarnation of this poem is dark and narcissistic. There is a bifurcation of Eliot's nature between the inner self and social self—entities that Eliot longs for connection but desires isolation as well. Eliot treats both of these selves in a fairly negative manner as he says, "No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be" (PR 112) or "I am no prophet—and there's not greater matter" (PR 84). Thus, as Eliot attempts to connect the inner self with the social self, the inner room with the evening streets, and his longing for both connection and isolation, the poem ends in age and death.

Eliot's contemplation of age continues in the poem "Gerontion" (1920) and there is a deliberate overlap between "Gerontion" and "Prufrock." J.C.C. Mays adds:

What "Gerontion" adds to "Prufrock" is the force of generality. It reduces the sense of personal depth and dimension of comedy and, at the same time, widens the range of reference. Gerontion is a less stable, less identifiable persona than any speaker in the previous volume. (113)

"Gerontion," a phrase that means "little old man," is also a poem that puts forth a divided self, and it is often suggested that the poem was a product of "the worst year of [Eliot's]



life" (qtd. in Brunner 145). The first 16 lines of "Gerontion" set the predicament of the poem in most succinct terms. Young age and a fulfilling future seem far away for the speaker as he says, "Here I am, an old man in a dry month,/ Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain" (1-2) and again, "I am an old man/ A dull head among windy spaces" (15-16). Gerontion lacks the wisdom to teach youth, and this concept is emphasized by the addition of "little" to "old man." Age has lost its merit here. Though there is no indication that Gerontion is Prufrock in his later years, Gerontion certainly seems to be an old, sedentary man who is full of regret. He is the Prufrock who found out there was not:

Time for you and time for me,  
 And time yet for a hundred indecisions,  
 And for a hundred visions and revisions,  
 Before the taking of a toast and tea. (PR 30-33)

Incarnation is not found in "Gerontion." Gerontion wishes to unite knowledge and forgiveness, and much of Gerontion's desires die with him as Eliot writes:

The tiger springs in the new year. Us he devours. Think at last  
 We have not reached conclusion, when I  
 Stiffen in a rented house. (48-50)

Eliot reiterates this theme a few lines later:

I that was near your heart was removed there from  
 To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.  
 I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it  
 Since what is kept must be adulterated?  
 I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:

How should I use it for your closer contact?

"Gerontion" presents a character that is "immersed in desperation and diminished to the point of ruin" but also has a "longing for transformative change" (Brunner 155). Yet the quotes shown above suggest that Gerontion was unable to find an incarnation that could unite the two. Gerontion failed to find a way to connect time and timelessness; he failed to grasp a death that brings life and was embraced only by age. As one considers the life circumstances of Eliot's life during this time, one can hear his own fears seeping through the poem. Eliot fears dying as a wasted, sedentary man. Eliot ends "Gerontion" by writing, "Tenants of the house./ Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season" (74-75).

The themes of "Gerontion," a post-conversion piece, return again in "East Coker," written after Eliot's conversion. However, Eliot's redistribution of these themes provide a prime example of how incarnation allows Eliot to renegotiate and redistribute themes he used to wrestle with. Both poems discuss the metaphor of a house and both poems discuss age. However, unlike the dark incarnation of "Prufrock", "Gerontion" fails to find incarnation whereas "East Coker" is saturated with it.

Beginning in line seven of "Gerontion", Eliot writes:

My house is a decayed house,  
 And the jew squats on the window sill, the owner,  
 Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp,  
 Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London. (7-10)

This seemingly anti-Semitic reference presents a number of difficulties when interpreting this section of "Gerontion." First, why is the owner of the house perched on the window sill? Second, why does Eliot use such animalistic rhetoric (spawned, blistered, patched,

peeled) when describing the Jew? Is there a connection between the deterioration of the house and the fact that the owner is a Jew? The answer to these questions dramatically effects how one reads the metaphorical reference of the house throughout the poem.<sup>4</sup>

Though the image of a house is brought up early in line seven of "Gerontion," the structural purpose of the image is not clear until the end of the poem. As said before, the coda of the poem reads, "Tenants of the house,/ Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season" (74-75) which establishes that thoughts are to the brain as tenants are to a house. Thus, the Jew is a metaphor for Gerontion himself. Thus, there is a sense in which the brain of Gerontion is at least capable of being self-transcendent yet because of age and impending death, he has begun to lose "sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch" (GE 59). He is losing that which can establish connection

That the Jewish man is a picture of Gerontion himself is consistent with Eliot's philosophy of poetry. Jewel Spears Brooker points out that "To Eliot [...] it is axiomatic that the all-inclusive and ever-developing whole is qualified by its terms" (319). In other words:

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<sup>4</sup> On Eliot's seeming anti-Semitism: Eliot's use of anti-Semitic imagery can sometimes seem like an elephant in the room when reading a select amount of his work, and, though a periphery issue for our purposes, should be address.. Though it is clear that Eliot's reference to the Jew was not favorable, many scholars posit that Eliot used anti-Semitism as symbolism and not propaganda. Scholars like Anthony Julius suggest that "Eliot's artistry lay in his ability to transform racist clichés and exhausted stereotypes into powerful, haunting figures" (Brunner 150). In other words, "anti-Semitism did not disfigure Eliot's work, it animated it" (Julius 173). Further, Jewel Spears Brooker adds that "Gerontion's mind is a metaphor for the mind of Europe, a collapsing mind which Eliot had little sympathy" (111). There is also strong support of this case through Eliot's background in the French symbolist literature. Brunner points out that "prejudice survives by refusing to proceed in open, clear, linear fashion where it might be challenged by counterexamples" whereas French symbolist writers wrote in a deliberately vague, non-linear manner. Thus, there is strong support for the fact that Eliot aimed at a deeper goal when writing about the Jew in his work than simply anti-Semitic support.

All fragments of reality, all appearances, are related to one another simply because they are all part, in the final analysis, of one thing which is the Absolute or Experience; and because Experience is all-inclusive, it means that all relations are "internal." (320)

Eliot took this notion from Neo-Hegelianism which was the most important philosophy in England and America at the time. One can see this philosophy working throughout Eliot's notion of time, and that Eliot spends his career searching for a concept that connects fragments of reality, especially those that are dissimilar. It would seem then that the Jew, traditionally from a people which God made a binding covenant with, represents the bearer of an old tradition or an old dispensation that is now despised and rejected. The Jewish faith rejects the incarnation of Christ, believing that Christ is not the coming Messiah their scripture predicts. "Gerontion," a man unable to grasp and accept incarnation, possesses no separation between his mind from his body. We are to suppose he dies in his house, as indicated in line 50. There is no incarnation that Gerontion finds that brings him either timelessness or life in death; he is only met with termination and age.

Eliot carries the theme of time, a house, and age into "East Coker," yet "East Coker" is a poem with incarnation acquired. Eliot begins "East Coker" with "In succession/ Houses rise and fall" and "Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires, / old fires to ashes and ashes to earth" (1.1-2 and 5-6). For Eliot to say these words, he shows the privilege of retrospective sight, and he draws the reader to this same vantage point. Not only does Eliot draw the reader out of time here as well, but he also draws the reader out of circumstance. Eliot distances man from the houses by focusing on a cycle,

defined by age, of organic, non-living materials of stone, timber, ashes, and earth.

Adjectives like *old* and *new* denote age which assumes time, but the victim here is not man or his mind but rather lifeless material. In "East Coker," only organic materials are anchored to time, and time defines the house's usefulness and how long the houses are present.

Eliot also states in his first line of "East Coker" that "In my beginning is my end" (1.1)– a concept also illustrated by "Gerontion." Within "East Coker," if one juxtaposed the early line "In succession *houses* rise and fall" (1.1-2, italics added) with a later line:

*Home* is where one starts from. As we grow older  
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated  
Of dead and living. (5.20-2, italics added)

one will notice that Eliot's intention in his beginning stanza is to represent lifeless, cyclical simplicity– but unlike "Gerontion," this is not where he ends. Eliot's rhetoric moves from a lifeless house to a home. If home is where one starts, then the house Eliot speaks of in his beginning is the aftermath of life. What Eliot shows us is approximately a post-apocalyptic vision of a time when his mind has departed but the world remains, which is unlike Gerontion whose mind seems tethered to his body even in death.

It is perhaps the discussion of age that gets renegotiated most drastically between the pre-conversion "Gerontion" and post-conversion "East Coker." Age in "East Coker" does not entail the impending termination that it does in "Gerontion," nor does it leave its character rotting and regretful; in fact, it is quite the opposite. Man has no part in the decay Eliot describes of the houses and animals in "East Coker" or "Gerontion," but in Prufrock, man's consciousness is highly involved in the perception of time past. In fact,

the first mention of man in "East Coker" comes in the middle of the first stanza, but the man is dead. Eliot says that earth is made of "flesh, fur and faeces/ bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf" (1.7-8). Eliot then adds that houses live and die—he makes no mention of men. Again, Eliot both draws the reader outside of time and outside of age by focusing the idea of age on non-living material. If Eliot's beginning is his end, then the life of man is cyclical whereas other material move in a linear motion of life to death. Both "Gerontion" and "East Coker" indicate that although man's *body* is involved in birth, maturity, decay and death, but man's mind is not. Eliot's consciousness transcends this time and succession through paradox, for though his narration is within time, his awareness is outside of it. Both poems display this concept two-fold as they both begin with timeless perspective but are then thrust into man's temporary existence.

Prior to his conversion, Eliot's poetry is haunted by a Prufrockian sort of despair. He laments opportunities missed, he mourns a hollow, lifeless culture, and he walks among corpses detached from reality and living quiet and meaningless lives. Yet, for all of Eliot's lamentations, paralysis and vacuity, his poetry almost always hints at a possibility of recovered faith. Eliot is not content with hollowness and continues to search for a larger Tradition and a timeless presence that can meet him in this world. Through the doctrine of incarnation, Eliot is able to find a final resting place for his obsession with paradox and his longing for timelessness. Incarnation allowed Eliot to end his search for something to which he could truly make a "continual surrender of himself" as he was "at the moment to something which is more valuable" (T&T par.9). Incarnation is the instrument through which Eliot can connect the disparate entities that he wrestled with for so long.

Philosopher Karl Jaspers posits that "a man can himself become is, qua situation, determined by the other persons whom he encounters on his journey through life and by the possibilities of belief which appeal to him" (qtd. in Sharma 49). The presence and pastness of the past is forever present in Eliot's work, and he constantly yearns to know what time demands. Eliot is a man haunted by time, and his fervent desire to unleash the restrictions of the present moment invade his work. Within poems before and after Eliot's conversion, one sees Eliot's continual yearning for a freed existence, and this yearning does not leave him after his conversion. However, one can see the helplessness of Eliot's yearning resolve in the *Four Quartets* where we do not find such resolution in "Gerontion" or "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." It is clear that in "Gerontion," Eliot fails to separate his consciousness from time. That poem begins and ends with a man who fails to reach the fullness and fulfillment of life. Unlike "East Coker," "Gerontion" is set in present tense and is not retrospective. Rather, the old man seems not to have experienced time, red in tooth and claw, but rather a slow, rotting time. One does not ultimately find this final decomposition in "East Coker". Likewise, the counterpointing of time and space found from Prufrock to the *Four Quartets* is notable as well. In Prufrock, the speaker asks, "Do I dare/ disturb the universe?" (45). Yet in the fourth movement of the *Fourth Quartets*, "Little Gidding," Eliot writes:

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. (5.27-30)

Once Eliot reaches the writing of the *Four Quartets*, incarnation is largely defined as the intersection of "here" and "there" or time and timelessness. For example, towards the end of "Dry Salvages", Eliot writes:

For most of us, there is only the unattended  
 Moment, the moment in and out of time,  
 The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,  
 The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning  
 Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply  
 That it is not heard at all, but you are the music  
 While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,  
 Hints followed by guesses; and the rest  
 Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.  
 The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.  
 (206-215)

Time and timelessness are defined by Eliot's poem as the metonymic "here" and "there," and the Incarnation represents a fusion of the two. Part one of Eliot's "East Coker" describes *here* as the world that both Eliot and the reader inhabit. It is the world that Eliot originally seeks to separate himself from. *Here* is where "the light falls/ Across the open field" (1.14-15) and where "in a warm haze the sultry light is absorbed" (1.20-21). *Here* is governed by time. *There* is the place from which Eliot speaks in the beginning—a place of timeless retrospection and full of life. Eliot ends "East Coker" with what A. David Moody calls "the movement of desire" which "finds its effective notation in the known world, in that aspect of experience which answers to the motive of



exploration" (156). Eliot's verse comes full circle as he says, " Old men ought to be explorers/ Here or there does not matter" (5.31-32). Unlike Gerontion, the speaker of "East Coker" embraces age as a mode of exploration; he is not sedentary and crippled by regret because incarnation has connected the *here* and *there*. At the end of "East Coker," Eliot writes a straightforward maxim of hope. This is a stark contrast from "Gerontion" which struggles to connect knowledge and forgiveness. Gerontion ends as a tenant of his house while the speaker of "East Coker" longs to be an explorer of his world. The incarnation that connects *here* and *there* allows the speaker of "East Coker" to embrace life in the face of death. Eliot's ending prose are full of life as he speaks of non-material, life situations of *exploring, living, moving*, and ending with the word *beginning*. Thus, in Eliot's end, life is found in the *there*.

"East Coker" puts forth "the promise of a possible conjunction" of here and there which "creates a movement forward in which the subject is willing to expose himself to all the dangers of the voyage" (Servotte 385). Eliot's yearning for timelessness ultimately leads to the Incarnation of Christ because Christ embodies the intersection of time and eternity. Eliot's first overt mention of either God the Father or the person of Jesus Christ is in the fourth section of "East Coker." In this section, the positive and empowering role of faith in Eliot's life and work is shown in its fullest as he writes:

The wounded surgeon plies the steel  
That questions the distempered part  
Beneath the bleeding hands we feel  
The sharp compassion of the healer's art. (4.1-5)

Section IV of "East Coker" sheds much light on Eliot's portrayal of Christ as the wounded surgeon. His second stanza begins, " Our only health is the disease/ If we obey the dying nurse" (4.6-7). Again, a paradox is shown in Eliot's verse as he suggests that our only health, or life, is a disease. This verse is similar to Philippians 1:21 which also contains a paradox if one isn't familiar with the theological relationship between Christ and Adam. Philippians 1:21 says, " For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Within this analogy of Eliot's verse, our life would be Christ and our disease would be time which automatically assumes eventual death. Eliot references man's paradoxical relationship with time by acknowledging that man's life is bound by time, and yet time and death are bound as well. For Eliot, the incarnation of Christ represents life that is not bound by time—thus, the incarnation is a key element in this equation and the reason why Christ is so important. Eliot has moved from the etherized patient in Prufrock to focus on the paradoxical work of the surgeon.

Eliot's depiction of Christ displays what Grover Smith identifies in Eliot's poetry as "a transmutation of other writers' language into new thought and feeling has worked as a symbolic device of stupendous power" (16). Here, we know that this reference to Christ is either during the crucifixion or post-crucifixion because Christ is able to heal though he is wounded, Donald J. Childs reminds us that Eliot had been using the metaphor of a wounded surgeon since his "Prufrock" days" (381). Eliot begins the fourth section of "East Coker" with a beautiful culmination of tradition, modernism, his earlier work, and new theology.

Sanford Schwartz labels Eliot's early work as a "double-pronged appropriation of the past" (20) or one that recalls the images of the past and reforms them with the

concepts of the present. His is a voice that is saturated in tradition and yet thoroughly modern. Here, Eliot is flexing his "make-it-new" muscles—a concept coined by Ezra Pound that mixes the past and the present and posits that an artist should never repack what has been said. Though the past is always in the present, it should never be left unchanged, otherwise, it would still be the past. Thus, Eliot's *Tradition and the Individual Talent*—a pre-conversion piece—adds greater depth to Eliot's use of time. Even the scansion of this fourth section of "East Coker" shows Eliot's mix of tradition and the individual talent. Scholar Grover Smith adds that Eliot's work is “dominated by a concept of cyclical change that only sporadically connect with felt experience in the verse” (3). Here, Eliot harkens to his past writings as he interprets the future.

Eliot's fascination with the incarnation is the driving force of his coming to faith.

Patrick Terrell Gray suggests:

To say that Eliot's conversion solved the personal and philosophical struggles of his early years would be too simplistic, but if Incarnation is a pattern for which he strove throughout his career, it would seem logical that Eliot would then commit to faith in which Incarnation is of its very essence. (311)

Though the pragmatism that Gray proposes is problematic—faith is often far from "logical"—the point remains sound that the incarnation, or the fusing of two disparate items, looms large within "East Coker". Aptly said by Herman Servotte, Eliot's use of the Incarnation when dealing with time and timelessness is not portrayed as "two lines which are [...] in the same place so that they can cross" but rather their intersection is "the meeting of two highly charged realities" (378). For Eliot, "East Coker" is haunted with

the fusion of time and timelessness and with an eternity in one moment. For Eliot, the Incarnation provides the final union between time and timelessness, life and death, action and inaction.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Eliot's struggle to redeem time saturates almost all of his pre-conversion poetry in one way or another. Eliot's obsession with the flux of time in the midst of a failing marriage, or a life that was passing him by, led him to search for the ultimate source of movement and the temporal, of life and of death. It was the incarnation of Christ that drove Eliot to Christianity because it connected the *here* and the *there*. For Eliot, true timelessness is found when time encompasses real and life-giving experiences, of which the Incarnation is chief. For Eliot, the incarnation of Christ provides an escape from death and thus from time that leads to death—this is only possible through the Incarnation. The paradox of the Incarnation justifies the paradox that Eliot puts forth in "East Coker" when he says that "to be restored, our sickness must grow worse" (4.10). Eliot posits that if to live is Christ and to die is gain, than to grow older, thus to grow closer to death, is how one is restored to life without time.

As we have seen, Eliot searched his whole career for timelessness and for incarnation, though they took different forms throughout his work. To say that Eliot was a secular, modernist writer before and during *The Waste Land*, and that he became a religious writer after his conversion is false dichotomy that should be avoided when looking at Eliot's pre-conversion and post-conversion work. Even Eliot himself denied this notion, and the many similar themes that run throughout almost all of Eliot's poetry, religious and secular, certainly deny this claim as well.

To say that Eliot's conversion solved all the problems of his youth and his troubled marriage is also too one-dimensional, but there is a certain resolution and contentment that Eliot finds after his conversion that cannot be found before it. Eliot's

complicated nature was one that was always drawn to the human and to the unparticular, but there was also a part of his character that knew the necessity of that which is outside of self. Eliot strove in his career to unite time, the individual, the human, and the self with timelessness, tradition, divinity, and society, and his conversion provides the necessary linking of these disparate entities within his work.

Eliot writes in the last section of the *Four Quartets*, "Little Gidding" the following:

The dove descending breaks the air  
 With flame of incandescent terror  
 Of which the tongues declare  
 The one discharge from sin and error.  
 The only hope, or else despair  
 Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre—  
 To be redeemed from fire by fire.  
 Who then devised the torment? Love.  
 Love is the unfamiliar Name  
 Behind the hands that wove  
 The intolerable shirt of flame  
 Which human power cannot remove.  
 We only live, only suspire  
 Consumed by either fire or fire.

This is not the same Eliot that wrote in "The Burial of the Dead":

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow

Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,  
 You cannot say, or guess, for you know only  
 A heap of broken images.

There is a distinguishing change between his pre-conversion and post-conversion work within the continued counterpointing of past and present, much like the messianic verses that are eventually Eliot finds resolution and contentment after his conversion—even at the price of the artistic expression. One cannot help but sense a double-pronged appropriation of Eliot as he writes in "The Function of Criticism":

There is [...] something outside of the artist to which he owes allegiance, a devotion to which he must surrender and sacrifice himself in order to earn and to obtain his unique position. A common inheritance and a common cause unite artists consciously or unconsciously. (68)

Eliot's entire poetic career yearns for a driving force outside of himself; a force that is acutely aware of the self. He longs for a past that is still valid in the present, and the development of this consciousness eventually rests on the Incarnation of Christ.

Yet, it is too simplistic to say that *The Waste Land* epitomizes Eliot's darkness and that one can then trace his spiritual journey from "Ash Wednesday" to the *Four Quartets*. Eliot's pre-conversion poetry is more similar to Old Testament messianic echoes rather than a romantic, nihilistic manifesto of Eliot's youth. There is an eventual face that Eliot puts to time and a fleshing out of the Incarnation which provides a peace or Shantih to Eliot's post-conversion words.

Before Eliot came to accept the Incarnation of Christ as reality, he, like the Hebrews prophets before Christ, searched for truth and for timelessness. Like the people

of *The Waste Land*, Eliot not only struggles with his surroundings being desecrated by two world wars, but more than that, he struggles with having lost time, purpose and hope. As Florence Jones notes, the history of the people of *The Waste Land* "lies in fragments around them [...] They can connect nothing with nothing. But if only they could reconstruct the pattern where all these fragments fit, Time and Life and Death would no longer appall" (286). Eliot's conversion connects these fragments for him, and these are fragments that Eliot wrestles with from *The Waste Land* to the *Four Quartets*. Eliot speaks of doom, he speaks of the flight of time, and the destruction around him, just as Jeremiah did in seventh century Judah. In this way, Eliot is more like an Old Testament prophet who meets Christ in the fullness of time, rather than a nihilistic modernist who eventually succumbs to faith for practical, emotional, or political reasons. Starting with his poetry as early as 16 years of age, Eliot searches for this resolution of disparate entities.



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