

SPIRITUAL MEANING AND THE PROPHETIC MODE IN T.S. ELIOT'S *FOUR QUARTETS*

by

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## Abstract

Among the body of criticism on T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, critics such as Cleo McNelly Kearns and Alireza Farahbakhsh have recently interpreted the poet's "intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings" (EC II) in light of deconstructionist theory. Although the poetry does recognize the difficulty of speaking about spiritual experience, it does not embrace the resulting linguistic miscommunication. In fact, the poems resist such a move, identifying the spiritual danger of such miscommunication; instead, they seek to overcome these difficulties and accurately communicate spiritual experience – an aim achieved in the context of biblical prophecy. Louis Martz argues that the *Quartets* are, in fact, not prophetic; however, he defines prophecy in terms of its social interests, rather than in terms of the interest in the human-divine relationship that characterizes both biblical tradition and Eliot's poetry. I want to argue that reading the *Quartets* in the context of biblical prophecy, filtered through mystical tradition, explains their ability to transcend linguistic difficulty and explore spiritual experience in human language.

In biblical tradition, the prophets overcome linguistic difficulty through a direct encounter with God, which purifies language of error and equips them to speak of divine reality. In Eliot's *Quartets*, the poetry undergoes a similar purifying experience meant to replace linguistic error with a meaningful exploration of spiritual experience. For the *Quartets*, linguistic purification is accomplished by means of the mystical *via negativa*. Appropriating images associated with the *via negativa*, the poetry denies language tied to direct perception of spiritual reality and adopts instead a language that conveys such experience through unfamiliar words and images. In that language, the poetry is purified of its errors and made capable of exploring the

human relationship with God. A poetry identified with the Incarnation, this solution communicates in human language the reality of spiritual experience. In this communication, the poetry at last explores spiritual experience in a way freed of miscommunication and meaningful for the audience, thereby fulfilling its prophetic aims.

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## **Dedication**

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. ~ John 1:14

## CHAPTER 1 - “The Crying Shadow in the Funeral Dance”: Linguistic Breakage in *Four Quartets*

The greatest amount of critical attention elicited by T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* has perhaps been devoted to his “intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings” (EC II)<sup>1</sup>. The intense difficulty of the poem, combined with its startlingly beautiful images and phrases, give the reader the sense that real meaning is “just around the corner” – always there, but elusive to the sense and to the mind. Beginning with the thrush of “Burnt Norton,” readers enter “a world of speculation” (BN I) and of “perpetual possibility” (BN I) never fully realized but inherently attractive all the same. Among the various ways critics have tried to explain this elusive sense of significance, there are three that seem particularly intriguing: the influence of linguistic theories since identified with deconstructionist criticism, the exercise of mystical practice, and finally, the textual use of prophetic discourse to communicate its vision. As a whole, the use of language in Eliot’s *Quartets* resonates most strongly with prophetic tradition, and I shall explore this approach (as well as that prompted by mystical theory) in upcoming chapters. The final interpretation concerns deconstructionist theory, which argues that the inherent instability of language shapes Eliot’s poem and explains its attempt to convey meaning. For deconstructionist critics, the sense of a Protean meaning ever sliding out of reach corresponds to recognized limits and practices of ordinary human language, the language that Eliot employs in the *Quartets*.

At the thematic center of the poem lies an attempt to explore the nature of spiritual experience – particularly the poet’s own. Among contemporary poems, the subject was a new one, belonging neither to the body of intricate and skeptical modernist poetry nor in the company

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<sup>1</sup> All citations from *Four Quartets* are identified by quartet and by the part of the quartet, so a quotation from the second part of “East Coker” is cited as “EC II.” Paul Murray, in *T.S. Eliot and Mysticism*, also cites the poetry of the *Quartets* in this fashion.



of second-rate religious poetry. All this verse Eliot believed too limited in scope, complaining in “Religion and Literature” that “the whole of modern literature is corrupted by . . . [s]ecularism” (28) and ignores the reality of the spiritual world. At the same time, he found that “the religious poet” ignores “what men consider their major passions, and thereby confess[es] his ignorance of them (23). Where secular poetry fails to touch on the spiritual life, spiritual poetry fails to touch on the emotions and experiences of the secular life, and so neither does justice to the full range of poetic possibilities. It is this lack that Eliot works against in writing the *Quartets*. In 1930, Eliot wrote that

between the usual subjects of poetry and ‘devotional’ verse there is a very important field still very unexplored by modern poets—the experience of man in search of God, and trying to explain to himself his intenser human feelings in terms of the divine goal” (qtd Gardner 29).

Where poetry held the most meaning, Eliot believed, was its union between the “major passions” of human experience and the reality of the “divine goal” and indeed of the entire spiritual life – a union that he seeks to achieve in the *Quartets*. As part of poetic tradition, the *Quartets* craft a poem rich in both emotional and spiritual power, fully capable of revealing “the experience of man in search of God” and, indeed, Eliot’s own “search” for God.

In the *Quartets*, the poet capitalizes on the empty space between “poetry and ‘devotional’ verse” and sets out to write a poem engaged in representing the nature of his own spiritual experience, a project that sets it apart from secular work. Eliot writes in “Dry Salvages” of two different kinds of poetry – the secular and the spiritual – and includes his own among the second, an attempt to realize transcendent experience in writing:

Men’s curiosity searches past and future

And clings to that dimension. But to apprehend

The point of intersection of the timeless

With time, is an occupation for the saint (DS V).

Any secular poetry, including Eliot's own pre-conversion work, limits itself by "searching past and future" only, without delving into the "dimension" of real spiritual experience. That such poetry is pictured as "clinging" to its interest in temporal existence implies its grasp of reality is a narrow one, overlooking – perhaps intentionally – the frightening depth and beauty of spiritual experience. A poetry of "past and future" fails to recognize what Eliot calls "the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life" ("Religion and Literature" 28) and so has little value outside the physical world. What sets the *Quartets* apart from such poetry is its interest in "the intersection of the timeless / With time" – the interaction between human beings and eternal reality, represented in poetry. That this interest is "an occupation for the saint" further distinguishes it from the second-class religious poetry Eliot himself decried: the *Quartets* are not a theological exposé given rhyme and music but an activity "for the saint" – an integral part of spiritual experience, praxis made into poetry. Assuming this theme as their center, the *Quartets* inspire spiritual passion as well as ecclesiological correctness and so fill the gap between "devotional" poetry and secular poetry. The attempt to translate spiritual experience from internal emotions to written poetry, though nearly impossible to achieve, centers the *Quartets* and determines the scope of their project.

However, although it is central to the *Quartets*, the attempt to represent "the point of intersection of the timeless / With time" in writing exceeds the capability of human language and so complicates the meaning of the *Quartets*. Within Christian history there runs "a long and august tradition" (Shaw 81) of religious writing, in which authors address spiritual themes and

yet recognize that such themes cannot be accurately conveyed in language. A tradition stretching back to Augustine and including George Herbert (Eliot's favourite religious poet<sup>2</sup>), this train of thought requires poets to "apply . . . all [their] efforts of expression to things which the common consent of believers deems inexpressible" (Shaw 81), such as the human experience of eternity. In many ways, such a tradition is schizophrenic in character – at once believing divine reality beyond the scope of human speech, and writing about such reality, which seems to fly in the face of poets' initial doubt. This tradition defines the position of Eliot's own work, as he, like Herbert, does not "abandon the use of language in despair over its frailty" (Shaw 84) but writes *Four Quartets* instead. As a poem invested in expressing those themes "deemed inexpressible," the *Quartets* partake of religious tradition and so find their theme shaped – and eventually, hindered – by the difficulties of such expression.

In the *Quartets*, the poet explicitly acknowledges these difficulties and the threat they pose to the successful completion of his project. Even as the *Quartets* take "the intersection of the timeless / With time" as their theme, they admit that

this is the aim

Never here to be realised;

[We] are only undefeated

Because we have gone on trying (DS V).

A theme "never . . . to be realised" accurately in Eliot's writing, spiritual experience represented in poetry will forever be skewed and truncated – never "realized" in terms of its objective being. Indeed, that the poet expects "to go on trying" and still be "only undefeated" – never victorious –

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<sup>2</sup> As Ronald Schuchard notes, Eliot did not come to fully appreciate Herbert until later in life; however, George Herbert's poetry influenced Eliot's own work on the *Quartets*. As Schuchard notes, "Eliot continued to acknowledge the impact of *The Temple* on his poetic consciousness and to include Herbert among the final handful of poets to whom he paid his greatest homage" (53).

suggests an utter inability to comprehend the nature of spiritual experience in poetry. When a task is completed, one does not “try” to complete it; thus, that the poet “has gone on trying” implies that for him the task of representing spiritual experience is never really perfected. As Eliot complains, all his work amounts to is mere “hints and guesses” (DS V) about the nature of spiritual experience. As a guess implies a lack of information or knowledge, so spiritual poetry as “guesswork” implies it is uninformed and even ignorant – its themes far short of the transcendent reality of God’s relationship with human kind. What this means for the *Quartets* is that every line and stanza written falls short of spiritual meaning, conveying not that “impossible union” (DS V) of God and man but only human “thought and theory” (LG II) about that union – nearly valueless for Eliot himself.

This thematic “falling short” bears severe consequences for the *Quartets* as a whole: a loss of religious meaning, at first partial and then total, as words prove themselves unequal to the task of representing spiritual experience. Accurate poetry, for the speaker, means that “every word is at home, / Taking its place to support the others” (LG V) in a stable and unified text. A stability like this is just what the *Quartets* fail to achieve. The attempt to represent “the intersection of the timeless / With time” lays on the poem a “burden” beneath which “Words strain, / Crack and sometimes break” (BN V) – slipping away from accurate meaning towards a greater loss of coherence. At first, the spiritual theme “strains” the poetry, taxing its strength so that meaning comes out “forced” or reduced in quality; later, the poetry “cracks” and “breaks”, losing meaning first in part and then altogether as religious meaning proves too much for human language to handle. The result is that words “slip” and “slide” around in the text: far from cohering into a self-supporting structure, they take on unintended and divergent meanings that bear little relationship to the intended spiritual experience. At best, the text is one rife with

“imprecision” (BN V); at worst, the words “[w]ill not stay still” and so misrepresent spiritual reality, associated with God as “the still point of the turning word” (BN IV) – an image drawn from Dante’s *Paradise*<sup>3</sup>. As an “attack” (BN V) upon Eliot’s text, this “linguistic breakage” threatens to dissolve the *Quartets*’ intended meditation on spiritual experience in to a mish-mash of words, in which meaning slides away into a misrepresentation of spiritual experience that jeopardizes the poems’ theme.

This “linguistic breakage” has recently been explained in terms of deconstructionist theory, which argues that the poetry embraces its own instability as the origin of potential linguistic significance. While such readings explain the very real problems with language facing the *Quartets*, they fail to appreciate the poetry’s need to overcome – not embrace – these language problems in order to convey spiritual experience. According to deconstructionist readings, the linguistic problems of the *Quartets* undermine a straightforward revelation of spiritual reality. Farahbakhsh argues that the *Quartets* “question . . . the structuralist correspondence of word and idea” (74). In other words, the *Quartets* discover their words inadequate to represent the author’s idea or experience of spiritual reality; more than that, they find themselves communicating the wrong ideas – ideas that represent spiritual reality inaccurately or represent what it is not. As Cleo McNelly Kearns points out, recognizing the “inadequacy” of language for supernatural expression is a “truism” and since “[t]here can be no full unmediated presence of word and thing on the same page” (141), words do not fail to convey spiritual reality but actually misrepresent that spiritual reality. Words become more of a “hindrance” than a “help” (Kearns 131) to conveying meaning, weakening the central spiritual

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<sup>3</sup> Michael D.G. Spencer points out that “Dante represented God as a Point” (10), an image to which Eliot frequently refers.

theme of the *Quartets* and highlighting the danger that Eliot faces in the composition process – miscommunication of spiritual experience.

So far, the deconstructivist's readings reflect the *Quartets*' approach to their own linguistic difficulties: the poet places misrepresentation of his theme among the chief dangers threatening the *Quartets*. Indeed, he worries that his writing will inadvertently communicate as God that which is not God or – more to the point for the *Quartets* – communicate a false view of spiritual experience. Contemplating the effects of linguistic breakage on his words, the poet recalls that

Shrieking voices

Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering,

Always assail them [words]. The Word in the desert

Is most attacked by voices of temptation,

The crying shadow in the funeral dance,

The loud lament of the disconsolate chimera (BN V).

As the poet seeks to write of that “impossible union” which only Christ’s “Incarnation” (DS V) accurately represents, this “Word in the desert” refers not only to Christ as a divine messenger – in fact, as a prophet – but also to the poetry itself. The “shrieking voices” here communicate the confusion and clamor associated with linguistic breakage, and the resulting “chattering” noise implies an utter loss of meaning that undermines real spiritual revelation. Worse still, these broken voices communicate not genuine meaning but a “crying shadow” and a “chimera” of meaning – counterfeit spirituality, rather than the “impossible union” between God and man in the Incarnation. Although the two images are “crying” and “disconsolate” and so seem to participate in the funereal air associated with genuine spirituality, these phantoms are insubstantial in essence and represent a religious eidolon – a simulacra of divine reality, not the

real thing. As Kearns points out, words belonging to a broken language are not simply confusing but “essentially misleading and even false” (131), bent away from reality towards their own insubstantial shadows.

Although deconstructionist readings capture the *Quartets*’ linguistic problems accurately, these readings also argue that the poetry embraces these problems as inherently significant – a solution which does not suit the overall goals of the *Quartets*. Farahbakhsh argues that “[i]n the relational world of postmodernism, language no longer intends an original unity or ‘the transcendental signified’” (69, quoting Derrida) and consequently, not only is one unified meaning not to be discovered in Eliot’s poem, such a meaning is not even expected or desired. Instead, meaning resides in “poetic indeterminacy” (71) – the multiple overlapping meanings produced by the text’s linguistic breakage. For a deconstructionist critic, the productive capability of linguistic breakage does not play the role of a villain so much as that of a saviour. Kearns argues that for the text of *Four Quartets* “this breakdown is essential to their ability to function as language at all” (141; italics omitted) – in other words, that the “material, heterodox, unfinished quality of [the] texts” (144) holds all possible significance. While their “reiterability, their propensity for mechanization and for travesty” (Kearns 144) undermines a single cohesive vision of spiritual experience, these instances of breakage open up the text to multiple invented readings. In the end, “the only thing that language can finally refer to is language itself” (Farahbakhsh 71), implying a poem no longer invested in the “intersection of the timeless / With time” as Eliot desired but one fascinated by its own textuality – right down to its flaws. A deconstructed *Quartets* is not so much a poem about the author’s attempt “to apprehend” spiritual reality in language but about the readers’ ability to project subjective spiritual

interpretations into the text – even misinterpretations and misunderstandings – and create from linguistic flaws the essential theme of the work.

Although the *Quartets* readily admit the limits of human language, they do not surrender their creative potential to its breakage as deconstructionist readings suggest but resist it, insisting that they will “go on trying” (DS V) to represent real spiritual experience. Arguing that the *Quartets* operate as a self-referential text more than a revelation of spiritual experience seems inappropriate given Eliot’s own theory of composition. It is hard to believe that the same author who so frequently criticized the insufficiency of human words for his purpose, and pictured them breaking beneath his touch as he maneuvered them into position, would then accept this breakage as the ultimate source of his poetry’s success. In the *Quartets*, he reflects on the difficulty of writing poetry:

That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory:

A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion

Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle

With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter (EC II).

As the linguistic structure of the poem disintegrates, Eliot finds himself writing not the straightforward meaning intended but a “periphrastic study” – a circuitous poem that retains little of the desired “meanings” and spiritual clarity. In fact, Eliot condemns this circularity as “not very satisfactory,” a judgment which suggests that Kearns’s attempt to praise textual “reiterability” and “heterodox” meanings butts heads with the “intolerable wrestle” of Eliot’s poetry – the unending struggle to communicate a cohesive spiritual vision. There is no room for a celebration of “poetic indeterminacy” in a poem that concludes its “poetry does not matter” and



focuses primarily on the theme instead – a focus which denies the deconstructionist reading and maintains the work’s focus on the human relationship with God.

Indeed, not only does the linguistic breakage not suit Eliot’s own goals, but also it poses an actual threat to the text, as (by Kearns’s own argument) such breakage misrepresents the intended theme in the poem. In fact, the *Quartets* recognize that misrepresentation produced by linguistic breakage turns attention away from real spiritual experience to the human conception of it. Words “always deteriorating / In the general mess of imprecision of feeling” (EC V) recall the linguistic “deterioration” and breakage and suggest that, as its structural unity gives way, the text shifts focus from that “intersection” between God and man to “[u]ndisciplined squads of emotion” (EC V) instead. An echo of the “shrieking voices” which parody spiritual experience, the “undisciplined” passions contaminate spiritual revelation by representing the “Word in the desert” (BN IV) in terms of rampant human emotions. As the poet discovers, such emotion only “falsifies” (EC II) the original experience, replacing the actual “intersection of the timeless / With time” with a simulacrum grounded in human emotion. This “takeover” of human emotion in his poetry would have ruined it for Eliot: Stephen Spender recalls that Eliot imagined prayer as “the attempt to concentrate, to forget self, to attain union with God” (qtd Murray 41; italics omitted). As Eliot connects “forgetting self” and “attaining union with God,” he indicates that any real experience of the divine hinges on the purgation of personal emotion; consequently, the reintroduction of emotion in the wake of linguistic breakage indicates a breakdown not of language only but also of the poem itself – undermining its meaning, and ruining the theme.

The presence of linguistic breakage in the text leaves the poem in a “tight spot,” in which the ruined theme poses a very real spiritual danger to reader and poet alike. The emotion-riddled text leaves the poem metaphorically

in a dark wood, in a bramble,  
On the edge of a grimpen, where is no secure foothold,  
And menaced by monsters, fancy lights,  
Risking enchantment (EC II).

Although several critics interpret this passage in terms of Eliot's mystical descent through the *via negativa*, the similarity of this "dark wood" to the one in which Dante finds himself at the opening of the *Comedy* suggests a slightly more ominous interpretation, as does the immediately preceding complaint that emotion and knowledge "falsify" the intended spiritual meaning. The "falsified" meaning leads downwards into a "bramble" of meanings, where the text loses spiritual cohesiveness and value altogether. Where the thematic confusion leaves the reader, in fact, is perched on the lip of the "grimpen" and beset by spiritual dangers – "monsters" reminiscent of the "chimera" that misrepresented spiritual wisdom and "fancy lights" which substitute for the genuine light of spiritual meaning. Any misrepresentation, in other words, threatens to "enchant" the reader, tricking him into believing what is not actually spiritual reality. Any attempt to celebrate linguistic breakage, as deconstructionist readings do, does not improve the *Quartets* themselves but in fact celebrates the undoing of their spiritual aims – of that "intersection of the timeless / With time" that holds the poetry together and makes it meaningful. Without that "intersection" clearly represented at their heart, the *Quartets* become no more than a linguistic "enchantment," spiritually dangerous in nature and containing only human wisdom. Given the spiritual danger resulting from linguistic breakage, the belief that the *Quartets* somehow embrace this breakage as the source of meaning seems nonsensical. In fact, the *Quartets* reject linguistic breakage, recognizing its peculiar pastiche of spiritual reality and the consequent danger posed to real spiritual growth.

Though deconstructionist readings do not adequately explain the *Quartets*' ability to communicate their spiritual vision, the question of how the poetry does communicate remains unanswered. The reality of spiritual experience soars far above the limits of human thought and expression, and the lingering errors of language continually confound the poetic attempt to express that experience anyway, without truncating or confusing it. On this question hinges the significance of the *Quartets* themselves, as they cannot give voice to the spiritual experiences of their author unless they first overcome their linguistic difficulty and error.

## CHAPTER 2 - “God’s Stake in Human Life”: The Prophetic Context of *Four Quartets*

As the *Quartets* perch “[o]n the edge of a grimpen” (EC II) thematically, the linguistic breakage in the poetry misrepresents the reality of spiritual experience, and the poem threatens to slide away into a morass. Given the dangers of such misrepresentation, a solution must be discovered to overcome it entirely – a solution capable of repairing linguistic breakage, thereby enabling the poetry to meaningfully explore the human-divine relationship. I want to suggest that this solution involves the biblical prophetic tradition. The prophets deal with the same initial inability to speak of (or even to recognize) divine reality, yet they produce enduring works of spiritual advice and poetry. Their experience provides a natural framework for the *Quartets*, where Eliot indicates his own desire to speak meaningfully of divine reality, and so explains both the poems’ linguistic difficulty and the means by which the poetry overcomes these problems. As prophetic tradition shapes the *Quartets*, the poetry moves past linguistic breakage towards a discourse in which it no longer misrepresents spiritual experience but in fact gestures towards genuine divine reality.

Very few scholars address the question of prophecy in the *Four Quartets* – a surprising omission, given the central importance of prophecy in earlier poems such as *The Waste Land*. Indeed, in light of Eliot’s conversion, one would perhaps expect prophecy to play an even *more* central role in the *Quartets*. Moreover, the one writer who does address the relationship between prophecy and the *Quartets* concludes that Eliot’s poetry is not prophecy at all. Louis Martz, contrasting the introspective quality of the *Quartets* with the social emphasis of Eliot’s earlier work, argues that these four poems are not prophetic but meditative poetry. According to Martz,

poems such as *The Waste Land* adopt a tone similar to that of the biblical prophets: the voice of “a reformer, [whose] mind is upon the present” (192) social ills and the means by which they may be corrected. In the *Quartets*, this “prophetic mode . . . has been absorbed and transcended by [a] probing, inward, meditative voice” (200) which attends not to the social but the spiritual dimension of human life. While Martz gives valuable attention to the “truly meditative voice” and its “quest” (203) for spiritual significance, the line of demarcation between meditative tradition and prophetic tradition is not as sharp as he assumes. In fact, a closer look at prophetic history reveals its genuine interest in “a probing, inward, meditative voice” that explores the human-divine relationship, an interest which connects it to the *Quartets* and shapes Eliot’s poetry as it represents spiritual experience in human language.

As a meaningful context for the poetry, I am focusing exclusively on biblical prophecy, as opposed to classical or Eastern prophecy. Eliot meant the *Quartets* to communicate “the experience of man in search of God” but, written several years after his entrance into the Anglo-Catholic church, they communicate not generic spiritual experience but his *personal* experience of the divine. As Eliot’s own quest ended in embracing Christian tradition, it seems that the *Quartets* would naturally reflect his decision in their poetry. Kearns point out that the fact that Eliot “chose . . . to be a Christian” bears “important consequences for understanding” (135) the language which he uses to write about God. According to Graham Hough, Eliot believed “that the central event in universal history occurred in Palestine in the reign of the emperor Augustus” (qtd Murray 84). While Eliot maintained an interest in Eastern and classical philosophy all his life, he interpreted “universal history” – including other philosophies – in terms of his Christian faith and belief in the “central event” of the death and resurrection of the Incarnated Christ. For him, the traditions and beliefs of Christianity were the most personally meaningful and

evocative, as well as the most accurate, and so naturally took precedence in his post-conversion writing. Consequently, the *Quartets*' relationship to biblical tradition is the most appropriate for Eliot as an author who was also a Christian.

Any discussion of the relationship between the *Quartets* and prophetic tradition must first begin by defining the nature of biblical prophecy itself – a form of discourse far too often misunderstood. The most prevalent misunderstanding is the belief that prophecy aims to foretell future events, often disastrous in nature and meted out as a punishment for sin. Although the biblical prophets certainly did predict such events, defining prophecy according to this function reduces it to a sort of spiritualized fortune-telling. In fact, most biblical scholars reject this view, emphasizing prophecy's more central purpose to inspire its hearers to a deeper, more meaningful relationship with God. Arguing that “the word of the prophet does not primarily involve predictions regarding future events” (Robertson 26), they make a “distinction between the forth-telling of the prophetic word and the foretelling of the future by the prophet” (26) and stress that the essence of prophecy rests not in its seer-like qualities but in the forth-telling of God's word. Martz himself “discard[s] the notion that the prophet's main function is to tell the future” (192), stressing instead the prophet's social role. Along the great sweep of prophetic tradition, telling the future plays a marginal role compared to the greater interest in questions of social and spiritual experience.

Indeed, the *Quartets* themselves display little interest in seeing the future, speaking of such activity as unable to express accurately the scope of human spiritual experience – the real theme of Eliot's later poetry. According to the poet, the desire to see into the future is common enough: human beings often

Describe the horoscope, haruspicate or scry,

Observe disease in signatures, evoke

Biography from the wrinkles of the palm

And tragedy from fingers (DS V).

Although “prophetic” in one sense, activities such as horoscope-reading or palm-reading conjure up the image of prophecy as fortune-telling, rather than a meaningful inquiry into “the intersection of the timeless / With time” and, as such, suggest Eliot’s disdain for this sort of behaviour. Significantly, these events deal only with human “biography” without reference to its “intersection” with the spiritual world; the only visions “evoked” depict physical tragedies below the radar of Eliot’s more intense spiritual inquiry. Without this transcendent interest, such “prophecy” proves fundamentally limited as poetry. Activities such as these may reassure people “[w]hen there is distress of nations and perplexity” (DS V), but they deal only with the “past and future” (DS V) of human life. They cannot follow Eliot’s poetry “beyond the limited, time-bound states of Nature” towards “the free, transcendent realm of the Timeless” (Murray 81), the path pursued in the *Quartets*. In the end, fortune-telling activities bear little relationship to Eliot’s poetry and so drop out of sight altogether.

Although the error of equating prophecy with fortune-telling is a fairly easy one to spot, the second is a good deal more insidious: the belief that prophets are primarily concerned in reforming social behaviour, as Martz himself assumes. According to Martz, the biblical prophets “spen[t] a great deal of time in denouncing the evils of the present” (192), apparently devoting their attention to social reform. Wavering between such “denunciation” and “the consolation of future good” pending appropriate obedience, the prophet as Martz conceives him exhorts the “people [to] return to worship of the truth” (192) – in other words, to resume appropriate social behaviour. Such a discourse operates in much the same way as a public speech or a sermon,

condensing principles of ethical behaviour and communicating them in an effective form to the audience. This reformist attitude, Martz argues, is the prophetic role that Eliot assumes in his early writing, where the poet anticipates “the redemption of a dead land” (193) and its return to individual ethical strength. Accordingly, Martz concludes that the *Quartets* are not prophecy at all, since they do not seek an answer to social problems but a “meaning . . . between the worlds of sense and spirit” (197), turning to deeper themes and assuming a more personal voice than biblical prophecy as Martz describes it. Although not without value, this view of prophecy concentrates too heavily on its social emphasis and overlooks the central religious interests and spiritual themes of biblical tradition – an omission which makes such a perspective inadequate for understanding either prophetic history or its role in the *Quartets*.

According to biblical tradition, the theme of ethical reform is not the central focus of prophetic experience. When Isaiah is sent out, the LORD asks, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” (6:8). The mandate to speak *for God* implies that Isaiah’s identity as a prophet is less tied to communicating generic moral principles than to communicating a message from God to a human audience. Although Isaiah does address moral reform, his prophecy emphasizes above all the relationship between God and the Israelites to whom this message is addressed. Moreover, biblical scholars generally agree that moral reform plays only a secondary role in the work of biblical prophets. Bullock stresses that “[t]he prophets were not social reformers” (25) but “theological reformers, . . . [whose] basic motivation was generated within their commitment to the fundamental laws of God” (25). Although an interest in the “laws of God” sounds reformative, the connection of these laws to God suggests that what they reveal is the appropriate human attitude towards God – in other words, the human-divine relationship. Interestingly, many of the most socially-focused prophecies named a specific audience but never carried the



prophecy to this audience. While one may wonder whether “the oracles [were] ever delivered to the Gentile nations with which they were concerned” (30), Bullock points out that most “scholars answer that question negatively” (30), suggesting that social reform is not the main point of biblical prophecy. The point is the revelation itself, a revelation of “the purposeful involvement of . . . God in the course of human history” (Robertson 70) that dovetails with Eliot’s exploration of “the intersection of the timeless / With time” (DS V). As in the *Quartets*, social reform takes a secondary role in biblical tradition, subordinated to the deeper interest in the human relationship with spiritual reality.

This “prophetic” interest in social reform is rejected, importantly enough, in the *Quartets*. There, the poet complains about the attempt to

dissect

The recurrent image into pre-conscious terrors—

To explore the womb, or tomb, or dreams (DS V).

Though more analytical than reading horoscopes, the psychological activity here – and the associated attempt to reform human behaviour – proves equally uninteresting and limited in light of the *Quartets*’ religious project. As multiplying references to “recurrent images” and “pre-conscious terrors” recall the vocabulary of contemporary psychology, the attempt to “dissect” these images and by them to “explore” human experiences such as birth and death implies an attempt to explain life in terms of the human psyche. An approach like this is bookended by “womb” and “tomb” and so reduces the entire scope of human experience to what Eliot called “natural” life, entirely overlooking the more important “supernatural” (“Religion and Literature” 28) dimension. Although Eliot does not specifically address social reform, his lack of interest in psychological explanations for human behaviour – during the modernist era, increasingly

attributed to psychological principles – suggests an underlying lack of interest in socially-reformative poetry. Martz is quite right that Eliot is no longer interested in “denouncing the evils of the present” (192), but this lack of interest does not contradict but reflects biblical tradition, also more interested in a “meditation on faith, hope and love” (Martz 201) than in deliberate social reform.

Prophetic tradition stretches over thousands of years and many speakers, but some traits remain consistent and permit a definition to be offered. According to tradition, genuine prophecy is the revelation of the human relationship with God in time. That the prophetic message originates in a command to “speak with [God’s] words” (Eze. 3:4) implies that prophecy is a verbal expression of divine reality, invested in “speaking forth of the word of God” (Robertson 27) to an audience. As the prophets develop this revelation, they explain the details of divine reality to their audience and recommend certain moral behaviours as a way to strengthen their spiritual experience. When Isaiah begs his audience to “come . . . and let us walk in the light of the LORD” (2:5), he recommends an action designed to increase their proximity and personal acquaintance with divine reality. Whatever bleak judgments the prophets pronounced on Israel and Judah, they sought overall to represent divine reality to their audience and so strengthen what Eliot called the “intersection of the timeless / With time,” or the relationship between God and man.

So central a role does the revelation of spiritual reality play in prophecy that even themes and passages which seem devoted to foretelling the future or recommending ethical reform contain at their heart a message about God’s relationship with human kind. As Bullock points out, Abraham Heschel argues that their interest in “justice” figures large in prophecy “because it [is] God’s stake in human life” (25). That the prophets’ interest in social values promotes a better

understanding of “God’s stake in human life” suggests that the real theme, even when the prophet recommends moral reform, is as always the human-divine relationship. The prophet Isaiah exemplifies the central interest in representing divine reality and the human response to that reality, seizing a message dealing with “the day of the LORD of hosts” (2:12) – a message of “foretelling,” as this day lay far in the future – to offer excoriating social commentary, bemoaning a “land . . . full of idols” (2:8). Although this speech seems to resonate with the social themes and strident voice that Martz equates with prophetic tradition, as the prophecy ends, the prophet imagines God “shak[ing] . . . the earth” (2:21) and concludes that humanity is nothing “to be accounted of” (2:22). What these final words bring to the fore is a clearer understanding of who God is and how he relates to Israel – the message that the audience was supposed to be taking from Isaiah’s words all along. At the heart of biblical prophecy lies an interest in representing the human-divine relationship, focusing on “God’s stake in human life.”

Although the *Quartets* do not aim for the absolute revelation of God achieved in biblical tradition, they do mirror the prophetic interest in divine reality. At the poems’ heart is an interest in writing of the “intersection of the timeless / With time” – the divine “stake in human life”. Where the prophets transcend “foretelling” and social reform and engage with the human-divine relationship, the poets as Eliot imagines them

ought to be explorers

Here and there does not matter

We must be still and still moving

Into another intensity (EC V).

As with the biblical prophets, the poet folds human experience into the greater theme of the experience of God – of the “intensity” belonging to genuine spiritual experience. The “here and

there” of day-to-day human experience no longer “matters” to the poet, and diminishes in emphasis throughout his poetry, overwhelmed by the “intensity” of his personal spiritual vision. What matters is the spiritual “exploration” that poetry achieves. The image of this craft as “exploring” reality suggests that the poetry Eliot writes is defined by the attempt to transcend routine life and instead enter into the unknown world of spiritual experience. There, the poet trades the earth-bound “here and there” for a spiritual mystery in which he is at once “still and still moving.” A.D. Moody points out that “[t]he dance at the still point must include all that we have been and might be, earthly flesh and desiring spirit” (190). Within this context, the poet’s simultaneous quietude and movement suggest a personal engagement with “desiring spirit,” and indeed, with divine reality. What comes into focus in the *Quartets* is the poet’s own spiritual life – a personalized version of the prophetic interest in the human relationship with God. In the end, the attempt to explore the human-divine relationship in language stretches from ancient prophetic tradition to Eliot’s modernist *Quartets*, situating the poetry within a prophetic context and clarifying our understanding of the poems’ ability to handle spiritually-intensive meaning.

In discussion of the human-divine relationship, the most significant feature of prophetic tradition is its close tie with the experiential reality of that relationship, one far more close than we imagine today. The words and actions of the prophets do not merely convey ideas about spiritual reality but actually embody some part of that reality itself. Gerhard Von Rad points out that “in modern European languages, the almost exclusive function of the word as an aggregate of sounds is to convey meaning” and is “used for the purposes of intellectual self-expression” (60). Alluding (presumably) to the theory of signification in which “both parts of the sign are psychological” (Saussure 961), Von Rad correctly notes that linguistic theory describes language as an “intellectual” construct that bears no tangible relationship to reality. This, Von Rad argues,

was not the case in prophetic tradition. There, language seems to bear “traces of a magical use’ of . . . word[s]” (Von Rad 62) – in other words, a use of language meant to provide special, material access to reality. As one instance of such usage, Von Rad suggests that Isaiah’s message that “[t]he Lord sent a word into Jacob, and it hath lighted upon Israel” (9:8) pictures the prophetic word as a tangible presence with Israel, one that in its almost “physical weight” (Von Rad 69) attempts to advance the audience’s reception of that word. The consequences for this presence are enormous: what the prophets represent is not merely an idea about spiritual experience but the experience itself, allowing the audience unique access to that divine reality. As “[t]he word of the prophet is the very word of God” (Robertson 45), the word of prophecy makes manifest the reality of God in a way that permits the audience to approach that reality and explore their own “stake” therein.

Although the *Quartets* experience considerably more difficulty in representing spiritual reality than do the prophets, they conceive of their own representation of that “intersection of the timeless / With time” as a means by which readers may, however tentatively, approach the Timeless themselves. That original description of the *Quartets* as “an occupation for the saint” (DS V) alludes to just such a discourse, in which the poetry is not so much words on the page as a means whereby to exercise and develop the human response to spiritual reality. As the ancient Israelites came face-to-face with the “physical weight” of God in Isaiah’s prophecy, poet and audience alike exercise the spiritual disciplines of “Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender” (DS V) in writing and reading the *Quartets*. There, they are suddenly more attuned to

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 lighting (DS V).

All of these descriptions suggest the very presence of the divine with both poet and audience. As readers encounter the *Quartets*, ideally they move “in and out of time” and so “in and out” of their experience with God, becoming through the reading experience more attuned to their relationship with divine reality. Where the poetry is “in touch” with the audience’s spiritual experience, the *Quartets* blossom open into a form in which the mind is “lost in a shaft of sunlight” and absorbed in the contemplation of spiritual reality. This effect is strikingly similar to that achieved in biblical prophecy. As in prophecy, the poetry here seeks to enrich and develop the felt experience of spiritual reality, carrying in this language what amounts to an almost “magical use of words.” The work itself becomes “music heard so deeply / That . . . you are the music” (DS V) – a transformative experience for the reader, prompted as art form and experiential reality of the divine blend indistinguishably together. That this blending is “the aim” (DS V) of the *Quartets* suggests that the purpose of Eliot’s writing is not an academic or theological perception of spiritual reality but rather that which commanded the attention of the biblical prophets – the felt, experiential relationship with God.

Importantly enough, Eliot considered such poetry necessary to establishing and maintaining the audience’s sense of spiritual reality. Without poetry, or prophecy, humanity would have very little access to the spiritual world at all. As the prophets imagined their discourse as a means whereby the audience gained otherwise-unattainable access to God, so the poet of the *Quartets* envisions his own work: what he desires is a poetry which is

both a new world

And the old made explicit, understood

In the completion of its partial ecstasy,

The resolution of its partial horror (BN II).

At this point, what impedes comprehension of and participation in spiritual experience is the same problem that impedes communication of spiritual experience in the first place: the fact that “flesh cannot endure” (BN II) divine reality, as the poet cries a moment later. Writer and reader alike find themselves spiritually trapped by their “changing body” – the material form of time-bound limits, which prevent them from realizing more than a sliver of transcendent reality. The prophetic aspect of the *Quartets* seeks to rectify this difficulty, making such reality accessible through meaningful language. A meaningful poetics brings together the “new world” of spiritual experience and “the old” of human “thought and theory” (LG II), a union that involves not an abdication of spiritual themes but the translation of divine reality into human cognitive processes. As a way to “ma[ke] explicit” the relationship between God and man, this poetry is a “completion” or “resolution” of that relationship in language. Whether felt as “ecstasy or horror,” the believer’s “only hope, or else despair” (LG IV), or an interweaving of both emotions, the experience becomes real in the poet’s language, invested in making spiritual reality “understood” for readers.

Within the context of biblical prophecy, the *Quartets* discover a means by which they may speak accurately about spiritual reality and so fully reveal “the intersection of the timeless / With time” in every word and phrase. Although seemingly beyond the ever-breaking human language of the *Quartets*, the theme of spiritual “intersections” in human experience is handled in rich detail in prophetic tradition, where the speakers communicate God’s words to humanity and so encourage further spiritual experience. As the *Quartets* partake of prophetic desires and aims, they situate themselves within this context and indicate a similar attempt to bridge the “timeless” and “time.” Their “central meditation on faith, hope and love” (Martz 201) gestures

towards the prophetic structure of the *Quartets*, the means adopted to suit Eliot's aesthetics and whereby the text communicates its spiritual vision to the audience.



## CHAPTER 3 - “And Prayer is More Than an Order of Words”: Prophetic Cleansing in *Four Quartets*

The parallel between the *Four Quartets* and the traditions of biblical prophecy opens up new insight into the means by which poetic language communicates spiritual experience to its audience. It is not enough just to identify the *Quartets* as part of prophetic, as well as meditative, poetic traditions: noting the similarity between the two discourses is only the first step towards understanding how Eliot’s work meaningfully explores “the point of intersection of the timeless / With time” (DS V) in spite of linguistic difficulty. The biblical prophets, like T.S. Eliot in the *Quartets*, encounter difficulty in addressing spiritual topics; however, that they go on to write prophecy suggests that the imagery and experiences communicated in their books hold a solution to the difficulty of spiritual expression – a means by which a human rhetor may accurately describe transcendent reality. In their solution exists the solution for spiritually-meaningful discourse in the *Quartets*. A discourse modeled on prophetic tradition shows the way by which the poet overcomes early misrepresentations of God and moves closer towards the “intersection” between God and man in poetic language. The “linguistic purification” that guides prophecy to a meaningful discourse guides the *Quartets* as well: this purification cleanses the language of its earlier errors and through the *via negativa* restores the possibility of spiritually-meaningful discourse.

In prophetic tradition, the prophets share Eliot’s concern with the near-prohibitive difficulty of speaking about the human encounter with God. Prophets do not spring ready-made into the sacred text but grapple with their own form of linguistic breakage. An initial inability to represent (or even to apprehend) God, pictured in terms of sin, at first prevents the speakers from

successfully addressing spiritually-meaningful themes. The prophet Isaiah, in his first encounter with God, fears he is “undone; because [he is] a man of unclean lips” who “dwell[s] in the midst of a people of unclean lips” (6:5). A signal of the prophet’s absolute fear and grief, the outburst underscores the utter inability to represent or even to bear divine reality at this point. Though the “unclean” condition mentioned involves personal sin, the references to language – to lips and by extension the mouth – suggest that this sin affects the apparatus of speech as well as the soul. Whatever sin the prophet has committed is a peculiarly linguistic sin, “undoing” not only his own relationship with God but the communication of that relationship through prophecy. The conviction of sin signals an inability to fulfill the prophetic ministry of speaking of God’s word, a failure similar to that which the poet of the *Quartets* experiences: both find that linguistic breakage hinders any linguistic exploration of the relationship between God and man and so also hinders the relationship itself.

In the *Quartets*, the poet echoes the prophets’ conviction of sin in terms of language: the linguistic breakage I have already dealt with appears as a moral failure, suggesting how fully the poet works within the prophetic context to achieve spiritual meaning. As the “chimera” produced by linguistic breakage enters the text, there appear a chorus of “voices of temptation” (BN V) that threaten to undermine the poem’s spiritual strength. While the speaker hopes to achieve a poetry in which “the impossible union / [o]f spheres of existence” (DS V) is represented as in the Incarnation<sup>4</sup>, he recognizes too the difficulty posed by the limits of human language and of a poetry

Where action were otherwise movement

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<sup>4</sup> The capital “I” identifies this event as *the* Incarnation of Christ; however, the absence of the definite article anticipates the poet’s own ability to recreate a limited union between God and man in his own poetry, a union that promotes in speech the human-divine relationship and so fulfills the ultimate goals of prophecy.

Of that which is only moved  
And has in it no source of movement –  
Driven by daemonic, chthonic  
Powers (DS V).

As previously, the speaker distinguishes meaningful from ineffective poetry on the basis of its ability to approach spiritual experience in language. A poetry that transforms the human relationship with God is one of “movement” and intrinsic spiritual vigor, but one that misrepresents this relationship simulates “movement” and has itself “no [real] source of movement” – has, in other words, no power to enrich real spiritual experience. What the speaker attributes this failure to is not merely linguistic limits but to “daemonic, chthonic powers” opposed to Eliot’s religious value system, implying that inaccurate language does more than merely “muddy the waters” of spiritual representation. Although such “daemonic” origins are (presumably) not meant to be taken literally, they suggest how greatly linguistic inaccuracy twists the spiritual meaning of the text – a 180-degree turn away from the intended approach towards spiritual illumination. It is, perhaps, this sense of spiritual failure implied in Eliot’s belief in “the natural sin of language” (qtd Murray 72); applied to the *Quartets*, this sense of failure indicates that errors in representation are not human foibles to be overlooked but crimes against the human relationship with God. An echo of the sense of sin pervading prophetic tradition, the moral failure signals the sharp need for linguistic reform in the text and prompts a second look at prophetic tradition, as a possible source for that reform.

In biblical tradition, the solution to these difficulties hangs on an experience of “linguistic purification.” Usually involving a face-to-face encounter with God, such an experience removes sin from prophetic language and equips the prophet to address the human-divine relationship.

Although most major prophets record such an experience, Isaiah describes it with the greatest detail, placing it immediately after his conviction of sin to portray his progress out of linguistic breakage towards a spiritually-effective discourse. After the prophet's outburst, an angel brings down "a live coal . . . from off the altar" of God and places "*it* upon [his] mouth" (6:6-7). Brought from God's own altar, the coal symbolizes God's moral purity; pressed against Isaiah's mouth, it represents the effect of that purity on the prophet's language. At the moment it touches his lips, Isaiah's "sin [is] purged" (6:7), his language cleansed from its earlier errors and informed by experience with the divine. That this experience "initiate[s] his prophetic call" (Robertson 77) suggests that this purifying experience solves linguistic difficulty: he who originally failed to look at God now assumes the prophetic mantle and commits himself to speaking God's word. A sudden change of behaviour such as this implies that the "rite of atonement" (Von Rad 43) acts as the catalyst for prophetic language since, in sponging away linguistic failure and restoring meaning to speech, this experience gives birth to the prophetic ministry.

There are two aspects of linguistic purification crucial to understanding its effect on the prophet and the means by which he moves towards a meaningful discourse. First, linguistic purification proceeds through two simultaneous stages: on the one hand, solving linguistic error and, at the same time, adopting a spiritually-potent language informed by experience with the divine. When the coal touches Isaiah's mouth, its fire takes away his sin and simultaneously bestows upon him the power of meaningful language. At one moment, the angel bearing the coal of fire reports that "thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged" (6:7) by the coal; at that same moment, Isaiah reports that he "[a]lso heard the voice of the Lord saying, Whom shall I send?" (6:8) and responds by volunteering for prophetic service. The word "also" denies much of

the temporal sequence we are accustomed to give to events and suggests that the purification of language and the beginning of prophecy happened for Isaiah at roughly the same time – his voice made clean, and his will bound to prophetic service. As Eliot puts it, that “[t]he moment of the rose and the moment of the yew-tree / Are of equal duration” (LG V) means the varying aspects of spiritual experience happen, much of the time, simultaneously; in biblical tradition, the prophets too discover that spiritual cleansing and linguistic cleansing are bound up together in the same moment. What this means for the *Quartets* is that one experience suffices to restore the language from its misrepresentation of spiritual reality to a meaningful text, able to express and enrich the human relationship with God for its audience.

Second, and more importantly, linguistic purification originates not in the prophet’s own human effort but rather in spiritual experience, so that the resulting language no longer contains flawed human meaning but is in fact informed by experience with the divine. It is a “basic fact that the prophets found their legitimacy and valid credentials first of all in Yahweh’s call” (Bullock 17), so that their authenticity and rhetorical power originate from the transformative effect of the purifying experience. The prophets do not “strong-arm” their communication into speaking of God, nor do they develop such speech independently; instead, they rely on spiritual experience to transform their language into a meaningful revelation of spiritual reality. Indeed, prophetic tradition stresses that the prophets cannot create spiritual meaning themselves and depend entirely on an encounter with God to authenticate their work. While Jeremiah, for instance, worried that he could not “speak, for [he was] a child” (1:6) in spiritual wisdom, he received the ability for just such speech at the moment when God “put forth his hand, and touched” (1:8) the prophet – the moment at which his own voice is purified and equipped for prophecy. An echo of Isaiah’s experience, Jeremiah’s reminds readers of the necessity of

personal spiritual experience to the rhetoric of prophecy, more important than personal creativity or linguistic skill.

In the *Quartets*, the poet echoes a belief that only spiritual experience rescues speech from its difficulty and equips one to address the human-divine relationship. As with the prophets, Eliot stresses that while the *subject* of spiritual poetry may be “the point of intersection” between God and man, the *method* of writing spiritual poetry is the felt experience of that intersection in the life of the speaker. Genuine poetry is

No occupation . . . but something given  
And taken, in a lifetime's death in love  
Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.  
For most of us, there is only the unattended  
Moment, the moment in and out of time (DS V).

In this momentary experience the speaker discovers spiritual meaning. For human beings limited by “time,” the surprise of the “moment in and out of time” is the closest approach to the perfect experience of the Timeless achieved in prophecy. The belief that this brief experience bestows upon the poet the ability to communicate and transform the human-divine relationship echoes the prophetic emphasis on the need for a personal spiritual encounter. What the poet accomplishes is not an “occupation” or a task for his own aesthetic abilities but that which can only be “given / And taken” in a continuous “self-surrender” to experience with God, so that the prophet does not develop his work himself but (like Herbert<sup>5</sup>) communicates that which is “given” to him.

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<sup>5</sup> Quite famously, Herbert instructed himself to remember that “there is in love a sweetness ready penned / Copy out only that, and save expense” (17-18; italics omitted). As I read it, the “copying” done here is not (as some have suggested) a hypothetical transcription or inspiration from God but instead the imitation in verse of the “sweetness” of the poet’s own relationship with God, making the experience of this “love” the theme of the poetry and thereby communicating to the audience felt spiritual experience.

Furthermore, that all this happens in but a “moment” echoes the simultaneous nature of prophetic cleansing – the immediate removal of sin, and the sudden ability to communicate wisdom. A spiritual poetry does not involve a process of gradual linguistic refinement and perfection, but only the experience of that which is “out of time” – the central theme of prophetic redemption, and the only means by which the poet gains access to the revelation of the Timeless.

Although prophetic tradition plays a major role in the *Four Quartets*, the distinction between what Eliot himself writes and what he considers the inspired Word of God must be kept clear. Biblical tradition believes prophetic speech, once purified of its errors, becomes “inspired” – in other words, proceeds directly from God and carries with it all authority and meaning as if God himself had spoken these words. According to this perspective, the semantic value “of the truly prophetic word must not be sought in the subjective experience of the prophet” (Robertson 26) when caught up to heaven and brought face-to-face with God. Indeed, the prophet functions wholly in an ambassadorial role, and the purpose of the purifying fire is not to grant him as an independent speaker the ability to invent meaning. Instead, given that the prophetic “word . . . originates with God and substitutes for his presence” (Robertson 26), the purpose of the purifying experience is to equip the prophet to perceive and effectively communicate divine meaning to the audience. The purifying experience, in other words, is not a meaning-making experience but only a meaning-preserving one, preventing him from infecting language with human error and upholding divine reality. To this length the *Four Quartets* does not go. Writing as if the poetry were inspired would have been a gross violation, not only of Eliot’s “sceptic[al]” (Kearns 131) tendencies, but also of his Anglo-Catholic belief in the supreme value of Scripture. The *Quartets*, conceived and written by a human author, are naturally incapable of reaching such heights no matter how closely they imitate the prophetic structure. As I study the prophetic

aspects of the poetry, I do not seek to argue that the text claims inspiration but only that, recognizing the pattern laid out in biblical prophecy for achieving such meaning, it follows that pattern, attempting to be as meaningful as humanly possible.

The *Four Quartets* recognize the purifying experience of prophecy as key to moving beyond linguistic error towards spiritually-meaningful discourse. The poetry integrates such an experience into its text as a linguistic solution, represented in terms of fire imagery that visually echoes the prophetic context. Any language seeking to develop spiritual experience must first be “restored by that refining fire” (LG II) and so, in an echo of prophetic experience, purified before speaking of God. Even to seek a “restored” language through the “refining” nature of fire reflects the dynamics of the purifying experience in prophecy<sup>6</sup> and thus suggests that the *Quartets* also pursue a linguistic purification. The *Quartets* discover this linguistic purity in much the same place as prophecy does – in a spiritual experience that “restores” language, crafting it into a system informed by experience with the divine. Any “discharge from [the] sin and error” (LG IV) of language requires the text “[t]o be redeemed from fire by fire” (LG IV) – in other words, purified through contact with the divine: the “dove descending” from heaven in a “flame of incandescent terror” (LG IV) not only bears the message of purification but accomplishes it, reenacting the angelic descent with the coal of fire and suggesting that the key to avoiding “sin and error” in language lies in a similar linguistic purification. What spiritually-meaningful poetry hangs on, according to Eliot’s work, is a purifying experience in which the poetic voice is purified of its former errors and so made capable of signifying spiritual experience. Already

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<sup>6</sup> So central is the linguistic purification to Eliot’s project that this motif surfaces early in the composition process. In the very first draft of “Little Gidding” he wrote that as “our feeling . . . sinks into the / flame which refines” that it (and the “individuals” which produced it) “emerge . . . redeemed, having their meaning to- / gether not apart” (qtd Gardner 157). Although excised from the final drafts of the *Quartets*, the connection between a linguistic purification, or redemption if you will, and the meaning of poetry lingers on in the work we read today.



embodying prophetic themes, the *Quartets* discover their solution to linguistic difficulty in the prophetic context as well, adopting the principle of linguistic purification as the means by which to achieve a speech capable of exploring for the audience the relationship between God and man.

Although the *Quartets* clearly recognize their need for linguistic purification, the ability to achieve that purification proves more difficult given the visionary nature of the prophets' experience. Their direct encounter with God, and particularly the felt experience of fire touched to their mouths, proves impossible for Eliot to render in his own poetry. A face-to-face encounter with God jars with the overall *Weltanschauung* of Eliot's poetry and its linguistic project. As Kearns rightly notes, Eliot, even post-conversion, was very much "a rigorous and lifelong skeptic" (131), wont to distrust sensory experience and the "warm fog" (Eliot qtd Spencer 77) of poorly-defined spirituality. As proof of this skepticism, Eliot eschews much direct or sensory representation of spiritual reality in his poetry, avoiding what Paul Murray calls "the doctrine of immanence" in which "all [the] senses" (79) are directly attuned to divine reality. As the quality of "immanence" or direct perception of God characterizes the biblical prophets' encounter, their purifying experience – however necessary to the *Quartets*' linguistic project – seems impossible to reconcile with Eliot's skepticism.

The textual challenges of the *Quartets* themselves further prohibit an "immanent" encounter with spiritual reality. Any direct encounter with God, such as the prophets experience, stands beyond the limits of sensory knowledge and verbal expression that hinder the *Quartets*' poetic performance and produce linguistic breakage in the first place. Already the poet has recognized that "the knowledge derived from experience" (EC II) and direct perception of spiritual reality has its limits, complaining that such knowledge

imposes a pattern, and falsifies,

For the pattern is new in every moment  
And every moment is a new and shocking  
Valuation of all we have been (EC II).

Alluding to empiricist philosophy, the “knowledge derived from experience” indicates human sensory perception, particularly its inability to grasp genuine spiritual reality. Ordinary cognitive processes perceive only that which is “new in every moment” – in other words, changing sense perceptions and experience; this cognition produces not precise spiritual knowledge but “a new and shocking / Valuation” of human nature and the world itself. Though not without value, this constant re-evaluation of the self cannot comprehend the eternal world beyond “time past and time future” (BN III) and in fact “imposes a pattern” which does not justly represent the breadth of spiritual experience. No wonder that Eliot distrusts sensory experience: what C.S. Lewis calls “the stream of immediate sense experiences” (8) has for Eliot a “falsifying” tendency, corresponding to an incomplete or even inaccurate experience of spiritual reality. Any poetry involved with sensory cognition cannot, by definition, successfully evoke a direct human encounter with God<sup>7</sup>. As prophetic cleansing requires the use of the very sensory perception that Eliot distrusts, representing that encounter in language would only further “falsify” spiritual experience. Given that the *Quartets* emphasize the need for linguistic purification, this difficulty requires them to achieve the same effects by some other means than the direct experience of prophetic tradition.

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<sup>7</sup> In fact, such cognition may actually evoke the wrong *kind* of relationship with God. A.D. Moody, analyzing the reference to such knowledge, notes that “its root is the taking a merely natural view of things; or, to put it the other way, its ignoring the Word of God. The consequence is that instead of ‘humility’, the proper response to the Word, there is submission to mere natural law” (213). In other words, the poetry belonging to this knowledge not only “falsifies” spiritual experience but provides an inappropriate experience which further divides God and man.

The solution to this difficulty lies in the practice of Christian mysticism, which promises linguistic cleansing without direct sensory perception and so offers an experience ideally suited to restore communicative potential to the text. Though mysticism covers a broad range of experiences and beliefs, even within Christian tradition, only one is significant here: the *via negativa*. A product of late medieval theory, the *via negativa* pervades Eliot's writing so deeply that Spencer writes that "Eliot . . . breathes of St John of the Cross" (77) – one of the most notable mystics of the "negative way" – in the *Quartets*. The near-omnipresence of the "negative way" throughout the *Quartets* is not surprising given their shared epistemological foundation: the belief that human beings are unable to perceive spiritual reality directly, driving the pursuit of a means by which such reality may be known, if only in part. A deep awareness of the limits of human knowledge grounds mystical tradition, an awareness particularly evident in the work of St John of the Cross. Among St John's central "conviction[s]" is the belief that "God is beyond anything we can think" (Spencer 104) – a belief central to mysticism, and correspondent to Eliot's distrust of sensory knowledge. Murray, who delves somewhat deeper into the mysticism of the *Quartets*, concurs with Spencer, pointing out that mystics imagined "God . . . separated from our world of multiplicity and variety by an immeasurable distance" (79), a gulf which recalls the flaws of "knowledge derived from experience" and reaffirms the basic inadequacy of such knowledge to comprehend God. The failure is severe: as Paul Elmer More points out, mystics such as St John believe the attempt "to realise the Infinite by . . . finite capacities" is necessarily "frustrate[d]" (More 269) – frustrated, in fact, in much the same way that the linguistic attempt to evoke spiritual experience is frustrated in the *Quartets*.

Appropriately enough, the means by which the *via negativa* eventually overcomes human limits and achieves union with God involves a purifying experience similar to that required in

prophetic tradition. The mystical “negative way” achieves its ends through an experience purgative in nature: practitioners abandon limited intellectual or sensory perceptions of spiritual reality and “[w]ait without thought” (EC III) for divinely-imparted spiritual knowledge. In essence, the believer “puts out” the light of his own thought and waits for God to flip the switch back on again. The intermediate darkness, which gives the “negative way” its name, “purges a soul’s approach towards God” (Spencer 104). What is specifically “purged” is that “knowledge derived from experience” – ordinary intellectual and sensory thought. When this thought is gone, the intrinsic misunderstandings of spiritual reality vanish with it. At the same time, the mental vacancy initiates a new, divinely-imparted understanding of spiritual reality. According to More, the mystical darkness of St John is “fundamental—the obscurantism of one who extinguishes his own light that he may be illumined by rays from a fount far beyond his knowing” (269). A moment that brings with it transcendent spiritual insight and wisdom “beyond knowing,” the overflow of this imagined “fount” of divine wisdom consummates the spiritual journey of the speaker. Avoiding the limits of sensory knowledge, the mystical darkness moves through mental confusion towards an eventual spiritual “illumination,” achieving therein the desired union with God.

For the *Quartets*, the exercise of the *via negativa* purifies not only the poet but also the poetry, realizing the prophetic communication of spiritual experience intended. A good deal of scholarly work has uncovered the mystical passages of the *Quartets*, whether analyzing these as spiritual praxis as Murray does, or as systemic negation corresponding to deconstructionist theory as Kearns argues. Although these effects play a significant role in the text, less attention has been given to its importance as a linguistic practice, applied to speech as to the soul in order to make possible not only an internal encounter with God but the communication of this

encounter to an audience, as in biblical prophecy. Indeed, the *via negativa* is ideally suited to accomplish prophetic goals, since the darkness imposed on sensory knowledge and resulting illumination skirts the unacceptable face-to-face encounter with God and yet effects a similar purification of language. The poet himself specifically invokes the *via negativa* as a source of linguistic meaning: for him

any action

Is a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea's throat

Or to an illegible stone: and that is where we start (LG V).

As the context here is the poet's discussion of poetic structure and composition, the "actions" taken – violent physical death – provide the physical loss necessary not only for the soul's approach towards God, but also for a linguistic approach towards meaningful communication. That these are "actions" implies they are chosen, not forced – taken upon the apparatus of speech as the "darkness of God" (BN III) is invited upon the soul. The journey that ends in beheading and drowning ends also in an "illegible stone," where its "illegibility" implies a loss of sensible language that echoes the loss of physical life. In other words, the poet brings his poetry "along for the ride" on the *via negativa*, achieving in language the same loss of cognitive meaning and the same "start" or renewal of spiritual experience. Although a language shaped by mystical praxis and illegibility results in some confusion of speech, making the text difficult to understand, the application of the *via negativa* to language bends the poetry back towards the overall prophetic purpose – the desire not only to experience the relationship with God, but to represent and develop this relationship through language.

The nature of this linguistic *via negativa* is perhaps best understood in the context of Paul Murray's distinction between the traditional "poetry of immanence" (78) and the "poetry of

transcendence” (79) that Eliot practiced. Although Murray concentrates on theology and the means by “which Christian poets have been accustomed to conceive Divine Reality” (78), the difference between “immanence” and “transcendence” goes a long way towards explaining how these poets communicate the experiential, prophetic aspect of “divine reality” as well. The standard approach to God is that of “the doctrine or the poetry of immanence” (78) – a poetry, in other words, that believes divine reality is directly available or “immanent” to human worshippers. Modeled, as Murray suggests, in the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins, this poetry seeks to “accept and love the manifest surface of the natural world” (Murray 78, quoting Graham Hough) and, as a way towards spiritual truth, the natural intellect as well. As a poetic discourse, dazzling images and spiritual insights characterize the “poetry of immanence” that defines Hopkins’ writing and, in fact, the majority of religious poetry. Though attractive, the poetry of immanence frustrates those worshippers who believe any direct perception of spiritual reality impossible and prompts a search for an alternative means of communication. The words that “[c]rack and sometimes break” for Eliot are those belonging to a poetry of immanence, which approaches God directly and so presumes to explore the human-divine relationship through equally direct language. As Eliot discovered, this presumption produces not the spiritually-meaningful poetry intended but its opposite, slipping away from direct expression into a loss of sensible communication. The results of a poetry of immanence, for a writer such as Eliot, are disastrous and prompt instead a search for a better way of representing such reality – one discovered in the “poetry of transcendence”.

As the reverse of the poetry of immanence, a poetry of transcendence denies the ability to realize spiritual experience through natural means and subverts such direct perception, representing as spiritual reality those experiences and beliefs not generally associated with the

human-divine relationship. The poetry of transcendence admits that “human kind / Cannot bear very much reality” (BN I). Accepting this limit, the poetry of transcendence admits that finding God in natural images is largely impossible and so seeks to move “beyond [these] limited, time bound” images towards “the free, transcendent realm of the Timeless” (Murray 81). Although this “move beyond” is traditionally made in the interior regions of the mind, its theory bears great significance for the prophetic elements of the text, dovetailing with the poet’s attempt not only to experience but also to communicate the darkening of sensory thought and transcendence of the intellect and thereby to reveal to an audience the reality of Timeless experience.

Accordingly, “the central object of the mystical poet’s attention . . . ha[s] little or nothing to do *immediately* with the life of the senses, or with Nature as such” (Murray 82; italics original); instead, the “central object” is the blankness necessary to spiritual reality, an about-face away from limited sensory knowledge towards the darkness of the *via negativa*. Trading ordinary communication for that which at first appears not to communicate at all, the text literally *transcends* its original difficulty and crafts instead a new means by which to communicate spiritual experience. Importantly, the transcendence achieved here results in “a rigorously austere and impersonal . . . grasp of the Truth” (Murray 27), in which the capital T signifies the God of Eliot’s Anglo-Catholic faith. Aligned with Eliot’s own beliefs, this transcendence purifies language of misrepresentation as the vision of God purifies prophetic language, restoring the *Quartets* to the Truth of spiritual reality and to the ability to likewise signify that Truth in language.

That this poetry of transcendence offers the *Quartets* a way to realize the purified communication of prophecy is clear in the speech presented by the “dead master” of Little Gidding, who both recommends this poetry and models it for his former pupil Eliot. Met in a

situation at once reminiscent of the *Inferno* and *Purgatory*<sup>8</sup>, the “dead master” gives Eliot poetic advice (as the spirits populating Hell and Heaven advise Dante) on communicating in writing a meaningful spiritual vision, developed by means of a poetry structured on the *via negativa*. In his greeting, the dead master admits to his protégé that

I am not eager to rehearse  
My thought and theory which you have forgotten.  
These things have served their purpose: let them be.  
So with your own, and pray they be forgiven  
By others, as I pray you to forgive  
Both bad and good (LG II).

As the spirit is Eliot’s former poetic “master”<sup>9</sup>, the decision to leave “thought and theory . . . forgotten” implies a desire to leave behind pre-conversion poetic beliefs and practices and adopt new ones more suited to exploring the essence of spiritual experience in language. For Eliot, his “own” poetic practices refer perhaps to much of the stylistic and linguistic characteristics belonging to early poems such as *The Waste Land*, characteristics which Eliot once found meaningful. At last, however, such expressions lose their meaning. Eliot envisions his master advising him to remember that such styles “have served their purpose,” and neither their “bad [nor] good” – neither their faults nor their benefits – communicates any real wisdom.

Accordingly, spiritual poetry begins at the point where the poet is ready to give up ordinary poetic practices and forms of knowledge and to adopt instead “another voice” (LG II) suitable

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<sup>8</sup> Eliot himself noted that “although the reference to that Canto [in which Dante meets Brunetto Latini in Hell] is intended to be explicit, I wished the effect of the whole to be Purgatorial which is much more appropriate” (Gardner 176).

<sup>9</sup> Although the “dead master” is frequently identified with W.B. Yeats, Gardner notes that “[i]t is impossible to hazard as guess as to what ‘dead masters’ or ‘master’ Eliot had originally in mind” (185). Among other things, the “dead master” recalls the opening lines of *The Waste Land*, where Eliot identifies Ezra Pound is identified as *il miglior fabbro* (1531) and so, to some extent, as one of Eliot’s many “masters”.



for spiritual expression. The surrender of “thought and theory” belonging to poetry echoes the surrender of intellectual and sensory knowledge along the *via negativa*, suggesting that as the mind is purified in darkness so the tongue is purified in the absence of its former poetic styles. A transcendent poetry, markedly different from ordinary human expression, approaches spiritual reality by an unexpected and surprisingly profitable way, learning along the *via negativa* a “thought and theory” capable of expressing the poet’s new spiritual experience.

Appropriately, this sacrifice touches the intellectual and sensory planes of poetry alike, so that the poet gives up human cognition as required by the *via negativa* and moves through the resulting purification towards genuine speech. The dead master promises Eliot three “gifts reserved for age” (LG II) intended to improve his poetry. Among these gifts are the following: “[f]irst, the cold friction of expiring sense”; “[s]econd, the conscious impotence of rage / At human folly”; and finally “the rending pain of re-enactment / Of all that you have done, and been” (LG II). As the mystic cannot depend on his own mind, so mystical poetry cannot depend on the ordinary means by which it develops spiritual reality for that mind: on sensuous images, on philosophical thought, or on spiritual meaning. The “cold friction of expiring sense” removes from poetry sensuous images such as Hopkins’ and builds a work constructed around the absence of such images, mirroring line by line the sensory dearth of the *via negativa*. At the same time, the old “rage / At human folly” and belief in that “[w]hich once you took for exercise of virtue” (LG II) drop away too, taking with them the excoriative philosophical and moral themes that characterized Eliot’s earlier work. In each case, the poetry exchanges one linguistic form for another, moving beyond mere correction of former “theory” to embrace its absence instead. These losses do not signify a nihilistic despair but genuine “gifts reserved for age” (LG II) – a

semantic benefit to the poetry. As an instance of the loss of human thought, the poetic loss here moves the poetry along the “negative way” into a purifying linguistic darkness.

Amidst the imposed mental darkness the “dead master” discovers new insight into spiritual reality, highlighting the mystical revival of the *via negativa* within the linguistic structure of the *Quartets*. What concludes his speech is a vision of the purifying fire associated with the restoration of the mind – and the voice – from their earlier failures to potential union with God. The “dead master” reminds Eliot that

From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit

Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire

Where you must move in measure, like a dancer (LG II).

As the dead master indicates, only genuine mystical effort has the power to “restore” the poet – and with him, his poetry – from failed expression to the spiritually-explorative language required for prophetic discourse. The progress made “from wrong to wrong” warns against continued reliance on sensory thought processes and mental faculties – normal enough for human beings, but opposed to the “refining” and purifying fire of God. Here, the “refining fire” implies the divine presence and particularly that of the Holy Spirit, often depicted biblically in terms of fire and flame. What the move away from sensory and intellectual perception becomes is a move towards the perceiving Holy Spirit and towards the “refining fire” waiting at the end of the *via negativa*. As an individual “move[s] in measure” with this Spirit, he accepts this refining, though achieved without his own sensory knowledge, as spiritual wisdom. As a poet “move[s] in measure” with the Spirit, poetry is itself “restored” by means of mystical illumination from its limited “thought and theory” to an exploration of those spiritual experiences belonging to real prophetic discourse. At last the poetry becomes, amidst the darkness of the *via negativa*,

“another voice” (LG II) capable of accurately conveying the human-divine relationship. For Eliot, the *via negativa* substitutes for the face-to-face encounter with God in prophetic tradition, a trade that allows him to maintain his skepticism and yet secure a purified language that speaks of the “intersection of the timeless / With time”.

As an advocate for a linguistic *via negativa*, the “dead master” models its purifying abilities himself, speaking from a position beyond human knowledge and so accurately describing “next year’s words” (LG II) – the expression of spiritual meaning. He is (of course) dead and reflects on the power of death to shape his language:

So I find words I never thought to speak

In streets I never thought I should revisit

When I left my body on a distant shore (LG II).

When he “leaves” his body behind him, the speaker per force “leaves” with it the normal sensory and intellectual operations of life and receives instead a voice laced with the odour of death – a voice which discovers unexpected communicative power in the perfect darkness of the *via negativa*. A literal “communication of the dead” (LG III), the dead master’s experience is both from death and also concerns death and darkness, revealing the rhetorical power of the “negative way.” The dissolution of the bond between body and soul loosens the master’s tongue and creates from the netherworld darkness “words [he] never thought to speak” – a new language capable of expressing spiritual experience. Given the “Purgatorial” (Eliot qtd Gardner 176) nature of this passage, the “refining fire” (LG III) which he promises the poet belongs in some measure to the master himself, implying the presence of spiritual meaning in this new language. After the loss of the speaker’s ordinary mental concepts, the fiery presence enters his speech as divine reality approached by means of a purified language. Though not perfected (the reference

is not to the *Paradise*), the deliberate darkness imposed on the “dead master’s” language gives way to a speech as rich in spiritual meaning as the immanent prophetic discourse on which it is modeled.

The poet’s response to the advice of his “dead master” suggests his willingness to adopt such a pattern. As the poet first encounters the ghost, he observes “the waning dusk” towards “the ending of [that] interminable night” (LG II) symbolic of his mental condition. In traditional mystical imagery, the “night” here signals the obscurity and confusion of the poet’s own mind; that this night is near its ending suggests that this confusion is beginning to lift and will continue to do so throughout the accurate and helpful speech of the dead master. At the end of the encounter, the poet has, to use a biblical phrase, passed out of darkness to light: he parts company with his master when “day was breaking” (LG II). As daylight generally refers to clearer mental insight and understanding, its presence here signals the new illumination of the poet’s work, manifest in his ability to assume through transcendent poetry a meaningful speech purified for its prophetic task. As the speaker moves from darkness towards light, the linguistic journey through the *via negativa* contributes to the prophetic mode, illuminating the poet’s speech and developing through that speech the human-divine relationship in poetry.

As if responding to the dead master’s advice, the *Quartets* increasingly adopt a language that recreates the mental darkness of the *via negativa* in poetry and so infuses the work with spiritual insight and significance. This transcendent language takes two particular forms of speech: first, undermining direct perception of spiritual reality and second, representing spiritual reality in terms not associated with the supernatural. Of the two, the attempt to undermine direct spiritual perception is perhaps the most apparent, existing on the surface of the text as contradiction or denial of whatever language seems to represent spiritual experience directly. As

Kearns recognizes, the text adopts a self-deprecating attitude in which it seeks “to destabilize secure propositions” (153) and so to draw the darkness of the *via negativa* over its language. Indeed, when the speaker recognizes the limits of his human language, he complains that “I can only say, *there* we have been: but I cannot say where. / And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time” (BN II; italics original). As he discovers, any direct representation of spiritual experience puts that reality into a box and so misrepresents it<sup>10</sup>: the attempt to specify “where” or “how long” this experience lasts ends by “plac[ing] it in time” and so rendering it in terms which do not apply to spiritual reality. The only possible response, consequently, is the continual denial of such representation – an avowing of the human inability to speak of divine reality, and a destabilizing of any attempts to do so. What the speaker adopts is a language invested not in “saying” the truth of spiritual experience but in “not saying” whatever truth there is. Abandoning ordinary spiritual perception, the poetry condemns such representation as hubristic and admits that it “cannot say,” moving in poetry towards the negativity of mystical experience.

As practiced in the *Quartets*, the language of “not saying” what spiritual reality is manifests itself in two ways: deliberately negating specific instances of spiritual perception, and avoiding particular words and images that directly convey spiritual reality. The negation of spiritual perception aims to prove religious knowledge – not religious faith, as skeptical readers sometimes suggest – false, and re-establish the mental darkness that precedes genuine spiritual insight. As an integral part of the “negative way” itself, such negation appears throughout the *Quartets*. A passage frequently identified as exemplary of mystical experience appears in “East

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<sup>10</sup> As Donald Childs notes, this passage recognizes that “the poet cannot specify time and place because the experience is ostensibly outside time and place” (126) – so far “outside” that the “particular formula of words” (125) used do not capture that experience. At the same time, Childs goes on to conclude that this failure indicates a religious subjectivity and even doubt in Eliot, wherein “reality [exists] not as subject or object, but as belief” (125) and so discovers in words “the contingency of the belief” (125) – a reading that seems to deny the very real truth that Eliot works towards in adopting such contradictory language.

Coker.” There, the poet informs the reader that “[i]n order to arrive at what you do not know / You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance” (EC III). What the poet seeks here is not “ignorance” itself but “the way of ignorance,” not only a lack of intellectual perception about religious faith but also the means whereby such perception may be undermined. The language of the *via negativa* offers just such a means, and the poet reminds the audience:

And what you do not know is the only thing you know

And what you own is what you do not own

And where you are is where you are not (EC III).

Here, Murray points out that the “debt” which Eliot owed to “St John [is] apparent to even the casual reader” (90). Indeed, his debt is all the deeper here since, according to Spencer, this passage is part of Eliot’s translation of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* – a key text written by St John of the Cross. Appropriately enough, the poet follows strict mystical negativity in his language: the speaker does not specify what the audience “knows” or “owns” or even what they “are” in terms of spiritual knowledge but prevents any positive knowledge of such things – defining such knowledge as what is *not* “known” or “owned” instead. As Farahbakhsh notes in relation to Eliot’s description of the “still point” of “Burnt Norton,” the passage meant for “defining” spiritual experience succeeds only by “say[ing] what it is not” (69)<sup>11</sup>, opening up the darkness of the *via negativa* throughout the text – mediated (at least initially) through a language engaged in “not saying” what spiritual reality is. Not only does this “not saying” effect “the purification and negation of the interior life of the spirit” (Murray 91), such a language produces also the “purification” of the poetic representation of spiritual experience. As “what you know”

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<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, so clearly does this language exemplify the effort of the *via negativa* to undermine direct spiritual perception that Kearns identifies it as a crucial passage in defining Eliot’s use of mystical practice in language, one that indicates that “divinity is so far beyond the categories of human understanding and ontology as to make [words] a hindrance rather than a help to its apprehension” (131).

falls aside, the idea of “what you do not know” becomes preeminent in the text and scuttles false concepts of divine reality, pushing readers deeper into the psychological darkness of the *via negativa*.

In the *Quartets*, the poet also employs the language of “not saying” by avoiding certain words and phrases associated with direct perception of spiritual concepts. Kearns points out that the *Quartets* avoid mentioning “either the name of God or even that of Christ” (141) in the text; indeed, the only names they use are oblique – Christ as the “Word in the desert” (BN V) or “Incarnation” (DS V). Instead, the poetry depends on images to convey spiritual reality – and particularly, to convey that human knowledge “cannot say” specifically what this reality is. The divine nature is represented as “the still point of the turning world” (BN IV) – a spiritual concept beyond the capacity of the human mind. According to Spencer, the image of God-as-Point originates in the *Paradise* and recalls the moment when “Dante . . . close[s] his eyes” (10) because he cannot look upon God. To picture God as a Point grounds the poetry’s spiritual themes not in what humanity perceives of divine reality but in what they do not perceive, preventing the text from advancing faulty concepts of God. The “[w]ords” which “reach / Into the silence” (BN V) are the poetry’s attempt to avoid specifically referencing that which is unknowable and to envision “the ultimate object of its . . . quest” (Farahbakhsh 71) in terms that undermine direct perception of spiritual reality. Though Farahbakhsh<sup>12</sup> mistakenly believes the resulting imagery of silence opens this reality to interpretation, the presence of silence nevertheless reaffirms the foundational lack of knowledge attached to direct spiritual perception. Instead, the language of “not saying” purifies itself of this cognitive failure and enacts in the text

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<sup>12</sup> Farahbakhsh concludes that in the *Quartets* “the only thing language can finally refer to is language itself” (71). Although her argument coincides with the mystical need for silence in the poetry, the belief that language refers only to language – and cannot aid in accessing transcendent reality – undermines the spiritual vision of *Four Quartets*, as I argue in Chapter 1.

a linguistic darkness, the only stable route towards the prophetic speech intended to develop the “intersection” between God and man.

Also present in the *Quartets* is a second form of transcendent language: representing spiritual reality through concepts not commonly thought of as spiritual, thereby confounding sensory knowledge. Since language operates as an “interdependent whole” (Saussure 968) that communicates through a “union of meanings and sound-images” (961) or in other words, a union of concepts and words, the language of the *via negativa* operates at “maximum power” when affecting not only spoken language but the concepts attached to such speech. A.D. Moody, discussing the spiritual practice described here, distinguishes between “a simple negation of the world of experience” and a communication of ““that which is not world”” (217), and though he does not touch on mystical experience, the distinction explains Eliot’s progression along the *via negativa* in poetry. At this point, the poet not only contradicts direct spiritual expression but also confounds the thoughts and attitudes behind such expression and in that confounding discovers spiritual reality. To do so, the poet employs language not associated with spiritual reality in order to communicate spiritual experience, an exchange which plunges the reader into a conceptual darkness, “transcending” ordinary concepts to signify the truth of spiritual reality. A pattern for this language is found in Aquinas, who argues that since “what [God] is not is clearer to us than what He is” (244), then language “drawn from things farthest away from God form within us a truer estimate that God is above whatsoever we may say or think of Him” (244).<sup>13</sup> As transcendent poetry goes beyond contradiction of what is “said” to undermine what is “thought”

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<sup>13</sup> Aquinas was not a practitioner of the *via negativa*; nevertheless, Eliot recognizes a certain affinity between his work and that of Aquinas, saying “that the method and the goal” of spiritual growth in his poetry “seem to me essentially the same as with Aquinas and Dante: the divine contemplation, and the development, and subsumption of emotion and feeling through the intellect into the vision of God” (qtd Murray 29). As “intellect” signifies not philosophy but the arduous trek upwards towards divine reality, his insight suggests that Eliot sees in Aquinas a trace of the mysticism that he himself practiced.



as well, the text adopts a language which seems “far away” from spiritual reality in order to confuse the psyche and so bend word and meaning through the prism of the *via negativa* back towards prophetic truth.

Following this tradition, the *Quartets* explore spiritual experience in terms unfamiliar and even unexpected for the audience: employing images that carry little intrinsic spiritual significance, the poetry integrates these into its central vision as a way to follow the *via negativa* along the path towards real spiritual meaning. The poet, seeking to end “the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings” (EC II) and so convey genuine transcendent experience, begs

Do not let me hear

Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly,

Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession,

Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God.

The only wisdom we can hope to acquire

Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless (EC II).

At this point, the poet rejects a straightforward intellectual poetry and – in a startling move – embraces one that seems “far away” from the intricacy of real spiritual truth. What is rejected is “the wisdom of old men,” wisdom which recalls the “knowledge derived from experience” condemned just a few lines earlier. Aligned with that knowledge, this wisdom is similarly flawed and therefore rejected as unsuited to meaningful spiritual language. What the poet embraces instead is “folly” and “fear” – emotions usually indicative of a disordered spirit and so “far away” from the pacific spirituality that readers assume Eliot seeks to convey. As the poet writes such emotions into his text, the result (at least at first) is not illumination but confusion. At the same time, however, such confusion looks forward to new insight: the “fear” of which the poet

writes is a “fear / Of belonging to another . . . or to God,” a fear which gestures towards the reality of the human-divine relationship. Where ordinary “wisdom” fails to comprehend spiritual reality, those emotions and images that seem “farthest away from” that reality bend backwards to explore and enrich new moments of spiritual insight for the audience.

The influence of transcendent language on the *Quartets* explains the presence of startling metaphors and even the complexity of the work itself, both instances of the textual attempt to convey spiritual reality through that language “farthest away” from it. Various particularly surprising passages in the *Quartets* merit a second glance in critical work – for example, the comparison between “an underground train, in the tube” and the mystical “darkness of God” (EC III). The general reaction to this passage is skepticism: to conclude, as Kearns does, that its “double entendres and mockeries of inflation” (148) contribute to the multiplicity of interpretations is to admit that one sees it as basically insincere or poorly written. Though Spencer concludes that “Eliot prefers to speak of profound mystical realities through quite commonplace images,” he does ask, “People in a subway represent mystical experience?” (83). The unexpected and unspiritual nature of this image baffles the critical imagination, yet this very bafflement initiates a more accurate understanding of spiritual experience in the audience. As a whole, the passage represents that which is not spiritual reality – such as subway trains; consequently, the very unexpectedness of this image prompts readers to leave behind their intellectual understanding of spiritual reality. As they are denied that “warm fog” (Eliot qtd Spencer 77) all too often imagined as spiritual experience, the audience is prompted to embrace instead the very “darkness of God” – the unknowability, and transcendence, of spiritual experience leading to eventual illumination. Along the path of the *via negativa*, the language

turns from direct spiritual experience, a prismatic move which reflects in the end the genuine light of spiritual experience.

Even the sheer complexity of the *Quartets* models the inverted language of the *via negativa*, for Eliot's purpose is not to directly reveal God but to reveal the opposite thereof. Amidst the confusion of their "periphrastic study" (EC II), the natural difficulty caused by a language that circles around the subject – rather than speaking of that subject directly – actually points the way towards transcendent experience. The goal of Eliot's poetry is to show the reader that

what you thought you came for

Is only a shell, a husk of meaning

From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled

If at all (LG I).

As part of the journey towards union with God, the traveler surrenders his human "thought and theory" as prompted by the *Quartets* and receives in return an inexpressible spiritual experience. That the "husk of meaning" conjured up by a cognitive understanding of the spiritual world is what travelers "thought they came for" implies that what they surrender will be their original understanding of spiritual reality, related only tangentially to the real kernel of spiritual experience. More importantly, the poem is itself designed to effect this surrender: since cognitive understanding is exchanged for mystical thought along the road to "Little Gidding," that the poem is entitled "Little Gidding"<sup>14</sup> implies that the poetry itself deprives readers of their "husk

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<sup>14</sup> A.D. Moody suggests that the title, among other things, conveys a loss of sense prefatory to real spiritual experience. The root "'Gidd' is connected with *guide*; and also with *giddy* meaning to be dazed, out of one's senses, with a root notion of being god-possessed or in a god-spell" (243). The implication, of course, is that the title indicates not only readers' own progress towards a place of spiritual experience but their progress, though "out of their senses" in a more literal sense than usual, towards reunion with God.

of meaning” and pushes them into the mental darkness preceding spiritual experience. To this end the *Quartets*’ renowned difficulty contributes. Eliot believed that “the literature which we read with the least effort . . . [has] the easiest and most insidious influence upon us” (Religion and Literature 26). An “easy” text is presumably one which corresponds to preexisting concepts of reality, which for a spiritual poem means appealing to traditional ways of conceiving God. Certainly, no one could accuse the *Quartets* of being “easy,” but part of this difficulty is its refusal to work “insidiously” upon readers and its attempt instead to deprive them of those concepts “they thought they came for.” The goal of the *Quartets* is not to present a straightforward picture of spiritual reality but to boggle the imagination, submerging it in a mental darkness wherein it communicates an essential spiritual experience.

Put into practice, this aspect of the mystical approach pervades the *Quartets* and prompts the poetry as a whole to convey spiritual insight through those images and ideas “farthest away” from divine reality. Although examples multiply like rabbits, one image in particular exhibits the power of such transcendent language to represent spiritual reality: for Eliot, the yew tree conveys spiritual meaning through seemingly-contradictory sensations of cold and death. Awaiting a moment of transcendence, the poet asks whether

Chill

Fingers of yew [will] be curled

Down on us? (BN IV).

At first, the yew certainly seems far enough away from that which is traditionally conceived of as spiritual reality. The ice-cold “fingers of yew” bend downwards over the speaker, trapping him and preventing him from looking heavenwards; its “chill” tendrils freeze his attention and arrest it on their own mental cold. The activity of the yew signals the implied loss of conceptual

knowledge and even “represents death” (Grant 116) – a paralyzing loss of self and sense, replacing the warmth of spiritual fervour<sup>15</sup>. Though the negativity of such an image bears little apparent relationship to the God of Eliot’s Anglo-Catholic faith, this negative language realizes the poetry’s spiritual vision. Out of this symbolic death, the poet ascends towards “the still point” of God, implying that the poetry likewise ascends through language “farthest away” from God towards true spiritual experience. As the speaker recognizes much later, spiritual revival co-exists with such death: that “[t]he moment of the rose and the moment of the yew-tree / Are of equal duration” (LG V) implies the immediate presence of spiritual significance in apparently non-spiritual images. In the conceptual loss imposed by the yew, there exists all along the promise of the rose and ascent towards God. Echoing the mystical *via negativa*, the linguistic style of the *Quartets* speaks of that “farthest away” from God in order to purify itself and depict for the audience the reality of their own spiritual experience.

At last, the mystical language “farthest away” from spiritual reality points the way towards the presence of genuine meaning in the *Quartets*, moving towards the place where the poetry represents and indeed grants the audience access to that undefined “intersection of the timeless / With time” – or the relationship between man and God. Though implied in the *Quartets*, this meaning remains unnamed, encouraging the audience to remember that

prayer is more

Than an order of words, the conscious occupation

Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying (LG I).

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, the nature of this loss indicates how completely the *via negativa* undoes the harm caused by the “knowledge derived from experience”. According to A.D. Moody, “the significant action [is] not the suffering of one’s fate . . . but the being in a state of illumination while doing so. This is the antithesis of the old men in *East Coker* II, intent only upon their own sphere of being” (230). In other words, the yew – and, more generally, the spiritual illumination present in the *via negativa* – responds to and replaces the “wisdom of old men” which Eliot scorned.

As something beyond the “conscious” perception of spiritual reality, the “prayer” offered up here means much “more” to individual spiritual experience than logical thought, but what it means specifically the speaker cannot say. Here, the aesthetic move reflects the work of George Herbert. Herbert defines “prayer,” in a poem of the same title, as “something understood.” Though offering no clear definition, the very “indeterminacy” (Shaw 86) of this ending “move[s] closer to silence” and thus “to the essence of what [the poem] seek[s] to define” (86) – the nature of prayer, and of spiritual reality in general. In the *Quartets*, to define “prayer” as “more than an order of words” achieves a similar aesthetic effect: offering no explicit definition of prayer, the poetry confounds neat-and-tidy “conscious” thought about religion and gestures towards real spiritual experience instead. The move past “an order of words” suggests a move beyond human verbiage and even ordinary religious language to genuinely-meaningful speech – a move which echoes that of the prophets, reconciling human language and divine reality. All previous misrepresentation and error drop into the background as the text arrives at a spiritual reality far “more” than the human mind conceives. As with Herbert’s poem, the move past logical thought is one that “moves” Eliot’s poetry nearer “to the essence of what that poetry seeks to define” – for the *Quartets*, nearer to the exploration of that felt experience of God appropriate to prophetic discourse.

According to mystical tradition, the mental darkness – however necessary – is only a stepping-stone towards spiritual reunion with God. In the mystical tradition of St John of the Cross, in the moment “when the darkness seems to be almost total, and when the Self has at last become detached from ‘the things of sense’, there occurs at the innermost point of the spirit what one may call an advent of the true, mystical illumination” (Murray 81). There, the purpose of mystical practice is fulfilled. For the soul, the “advent of true illumination” restores clear

spiritual insight; for the poet, clear spiritual expression. In the *Quartets*, the linguistic darkness gestures towards just this fulfillment: the “true illumination” of prophecy, in which the poet realizes an unbroken language capable not only of describing but also enriching real spiritual experience. Eliot himself affirms that “[t]he end is where we start from” (LG V), implying that what seems an “end” to human cognitive knowledge and indeed all spiritual perception is not the “end” at all. The transcendent language is instead the “start” of a new spiritual discourse, unexpected amidst the linguistic breakage that earlier pervaded the poetry. It is this language that “starts” to convey spiritual meaning, dovetailing perfectly with the prophetic voice and assisting the poetry to explore and enrich spiritual reality for its audience.

As the *Quartets* realize “true illumination” through mystical experience, the breakage that earlier frustrated their efforts fades into the background, replaced by a transcendent language suited to prophetic discourse. The linguistic breakage is overcome in a place “[n]ot too far from the yew-tree” (DS V) – or, in other words, by means of mystical language. Within the *Quartets*, the symbolic presence of the yew effects a linguistic “temporal reversion” (DS V) which turns the poetry away from its earlier errors. What the speaker reverts against are those “daemonic, chthonic / Powers” (DS V) opposed to the representation of the human-divine relationship. Since these “powers” simulate the “impossible union” of Christ, they cast back to the devilish “crying shadow” of “Burnt Norton” and suggest that the text here reverts not merely from spiritual error but also from linguistic errors which prevent the approach towards God through poetry. As the negative language associated with the yew cleanses the *Quartets* of the “sin of language” (Eliot qtd Murray 72) and associated failure, the poetry transcends ordinary human thought and aligns itself with the purified language of prophecy. So effective is this prophetic transcendence that it serves as the standard for Eliot’s poetics, ensuring that “[e]very poem [is] an epitaph” (LG V) –

in other words, a representation of the conceptual loss necessary to move past linguistic breakage and speak meaningfully about the human-divine relationship. The poetry understands clearly that “to make an end is to make a beginning” (LG V), signifying conceptual darkness in order to explore, simultaneously, essential spiritual reality. Through the “ending” of mystical practice, the poetry discovers the “beginning” of personal spiritual experience and with it the “beginning” of a prophetic language capable of exploring that experience, developing word by word the “intersection” between man and God.

Indeed, so thoroughly is linguistic breakage purified from the text that the resulting poetry both represents and partakes of the human-divine relationship, granting its readers that special access to spiritual reality which defines the prophetic voice. The poet reminds his readers that

You are not here to verify,  
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity  
Or carry report. You are here to kneel  
Where prayer has been valid (LG I).

At this point, the poetry is transformed from a mere record of theological principles into a “valid prayer” rich with details about the human-divine relationship. A prayer is traditionally conceived of as a conversation between a human being and God – in other words, a verbal expression of the speaker’s relationship with God. Applied to the *Quartets*, the concept of “prayer” suggests their power to express and even to strengthen the human relationship with God, whether that of the writer or the reader. That the audience “kneels” in response to the *Quartets* reaffirms the power that such expression has to give readers access to reality – a chief function of prophetic discourse. As the poetry moves past logical thought, the audience moves with it past “[s]ense and



notion” (LG I). They are no longer able “to verify / Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity” (LG I) about spiritual experience but in fact are brought into an experience of the reality of God. Where the prophets made God’s Word a “physical weight” felt by the Israelites, the *Quartets* make the communication between God and man real for the audience, leading them upwards along the path of “transcendence” towards the “intersection of the timeless / With time” – a poetry beautiful in its linguistic significance, and pregnant with real prophetic potential.

The mystical practices of the *Quartets* influence the poetry far beyond the poet’s own spiritual experience, uncovering also a purified prophetic voice in which the poetry speaks meaningfully of divine reality. Avoiding the face-to-face encounter of biblical tradition, the language mediated through the *via negativa* adapts itself to human limits and recreates the prophetic power to communicate and develop the human relationship with God. According to biblical tradition, the prophetic “word . . . is the very word of God” (Robertson 45). What this means for the prophetic voice is that its purification gives birth to a speech that resonates with spiritual meaning and insight, transmitting to the audience concepts otherwise inexpressible through a human rhetor. Though this immanent speech is theologically and practically unsuited to the *Quartets*, the transcendent voice achieved approximates their purified language and with it the spiritual meaning of prophecy. While the *Quartets* cannot speak “the very word of God,” their transcendent quality gestures past their own limits and those of the human psyche towards words which express the human relationship with God. Cleansed in the *via negativa* of the errors of human intellectual thought, the language realizes in that mental darkness “the moment of the rose” (LG V) – its own moment of spiritually-meaningful discourse. In the end, the prophetic structure of the *Quartets* prompts them to recognize and cleanse themselves of spiritual failure,

adopting instead a language better adapted for human limits and better suited to communicate the transcendent reality of the spiritual world.

## CHAPTER 4 - “Communication As Communion”: the Incarnational Discourse of *Four Quartets*

The “intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings” (EC II) commands a great deal of the poet’s attention throughout the *Quartets*, as he seeks a poetry capable of transcending linguistic breakage and adequately exploring the relationship between man and God. Towards the end of the *Quartets*, however, the poetry begins to explore as well a language capable of such communication, one in which linguistic breakage is overcome and spiritual experience becomes real. Among the first whispers of such a language is the terminal promise of “East Coker” that “[i]n my end is my beginning” (EC V). As the poetry undergoes the “ending” required by the *via negativa*, this promise lingers on as a spoken pledge of increased spiritual significance. Later, this language is discovered in the “moment in and out of time” (DS V) and in the “intersection of the timeless moment” (LG I) following mystical practice, a momentary experience immediately present in the transcendent language of the text. As these moments intensify throughout the *Quartets*, the poetry ascends from the frustrations of linguistic breakage and the difficulty of purification towards a meaningful exploration of spiritual experience. For Eliot, the ascent awaits completion in heaven; a perfected language can “[n]ever here . . . be realised” (DS V) on earth. At the same time, the ascent moves beyond the simple communication of theological principles to realize “a ‘communication’ that is also ‘a form of communion’” (Moody 245), a prophetic language designed to explore and to enrich the human relationship with God.

As linguistic breakage drops away from the purified language of the *Quartets*, the poetry becomes “more than an order of words” and discovers in its sound and syntax, once the locus of breakage, a renewed potential for prophetic meaning. The poet insists that

the communication

Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.

Here, the intersection of the timeless moment

Is England and nowhere. Never and always (LG I).

At this point, mystical language merges into a meaningful exploration of transcendent experience, written in human language. Given that the “communication of the dead” alludes to mystical language, the “tongues of fire” indicate the power that such speech has to depict spiritual reality in a form accessible to the audience. A language “tongued with fire” evokes the language of Isaiah, whose lips (and by extension, voice) were purged with the coal of fire from God. Moreover, the “tongues of fire” also evoke Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit physically descended in flames of fire onto believers and prepared them to deliver the inaugural gospel message. A message delivered – or at least received – in the different languages of the audience, this message is a “translation” of spiritual meaning into a form of speech understood by the audience. Applied to Eliot’s language, the fire imagery suggests that the purified “communication of the dead” is similarly a “translation” of spiritual experience into human form, transcendent reality captured in the “order of words” – in the grammar and syntax – belonging to ordinary human language. As spiritual meaning is rendered in speech, the “translation” produced here provides a point of access whereby the audience may apprehend that meaning. A moment later, this language discovers “here” in its text an experience of “the intersection of the timeless moment” between the human soul and God, a moment that indicates the ability of this language to move “beyond” mere poetic form and become both communication and communion, thereby fulfilling the prophetic goal.

Appropriately, the poetry describes this language in terms of Incarnation – according to prophetic tradition, a truly perfect union of divine meaning and human form. The “intersection of the timeless moment” realized in Eliot’s poetry recalls the “intersection of the timeless / With time” (DS V) first, and most perfectly, realized in the Christian Incarnation. There, “the impossible union / Of spheres of existence” is made “actual” (DS V) – a complete reconciliation of human and divine being which Eliot justly acknowledges can “never be realized” in his own poetry. At the same time, this

unity bears relevance for the “timeless moment” of the *Quartets*, in which the poetry leaves behind the “metalled ways / Of time past and time future” (BN IV) and enters into a meaningful exploration of “Never and always.” In this exchange, the poetry ascends away from earlier linguistic breakage towards a clearer language, one in which human words convey not the human “wisdom of old men” (EC II) but the experience of timelessness and eternity. Aligned with the Incarnation, this exploratory language realizes a new communicative power<sup>16</sup>: the ability to translate spiritual experience into the forms of human speech. Although the perfect union of the Incarnation remains forever beyond the poetry, as far as God is beyond human comprehension, the poetry ascends towards a similarly “incarnational” discourse wherein to explore spiritual experience in human words.

It is in prophetic tradition and particularly in the Incarnation of Christ that the incarnational imagery used to describe the “intersection of the timeless moment” in language originates. As “the prophet who would consummate God’s purpose as it was indicated from the time of the origination of the prophetic office” (Robertson 63), Christ embodied the linguistic union between human words and spiritual meaning – a union intended, as in Old Testament prophecy, to develop the human relationship with God. The essential feature of the Incarnation was that in Christ “the word was God” (John 1:1). This equation does not mean that language itself becomes God, as some critics – particularly deconstructionist scholars – suggest. Kearns, quoting Derrida’s claim that “Language . . . is what theology calls God” (138), argues that the poetry of the *Quartets* “inaugurate[s] what we might call a ‘becoming material’, or, to reinstate theology with a difference, a *becoming incarnational* of language” (144, italics original). As I take Kearns’s meaning, the significance of language lies in its “materiality,” so that the text does not *signify* spiritual reality; the material text *is*

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<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the Incarnational imagery seems to be the natural outgrowth of transcendent poetry. Evelyn Underhill, a student of mysticism whom Eliot admired, wrote that “[i]t is by the Christian dogma of the Incarnation that it [mystical philosophy] has best been able to describe and to explain the nature of the inward and personal mystical experience (qtd Murray 76, italics omitted, brackets original) – an experience that, according to Eliot, comes only after the *via negativa*.

*itself* this reality. According to Eliot's theology, however, the passage bears a somewhat different meaning. In the Incarnation, that "the word [of God] was made flesh" (1:14) implies a junction between spiritual significance and material form. Applied to language, the union of divine Word and human words restores the "moment of original plenitude when form and meaning were simultaneously present to consciousness and not to be distinguished" (Culler 19) – a plenitude approximated in the *Quartets*. As Christ communicates divine meaning in human form, the language of the *Quartets* communicates the meaning of spiritual experience through the forms and structures of human language. As poetic form and poetic meaning are reconciled from their earlier breakage, the text ascends towards an "incarnational" language, wherein spiritual experience is made real and the prophetic mode of the *Quartets* at last fulfilled.

Eliot himself stressed the importance of "incarnational" language in the *Quartets*, arguing that the integration of spiritual experience and human speech is crucial for effectively communicating that experience to an audience. Around the time the *Quartets* were written, Eliot insisted that poetry operates ideally as "a kind of humble shadow of the Incarnation *whereby the human is taken up into the divine*" (qtd Murray 86; italics original). An "incarnational" language, for Eliot, did not mean the "descent of divine plenitude into the depths of human nature" (Murray 86) – a supernatural experience, *verboten* in Eliot's poetry – but only the "slow difficult ascent of human nature upwards into the divine realm" (Murray 86). Indeed, this "ascent" does not mean that poetry claims the perfect revelation of *the* Incarnation, particularly since the final stanza of "Little Gidding" still anticipates a moment when "all shall be well" (LG V) and its "hints and guesses" (DS V) about spiritual reality fully answered. Instead, the ascent towards meaning indicates that the poetry realizes a language modeled on the Incarnation. Where words are purged of human error, they communicate through their "order" and form an essential spiritual meaning, one originally "beyond" their capacity. Achieved through the appropriation of mystical

and prophetic discourse, this poetry translates spiritual reality into human language, ascending word by word towards “a deeper communion” (EC V) with God.

In the *Quartets*, instances of this incarnational language appear as early as “Burnt Norton” – for example, the images of “un-being and being” and the “shaft of sunlight” (BN V) later realized as incarnational<sup>17</sup>. Still, the early poems are dominated by the desert chimera and by attempts to conquer that breakage, and it remains for later *Quartets* to demonstrate the communicative possibilities of an “incarnational” language. In the fourth stanza of “Little Gidding,” the poet describes this incarnational language in terms of Pentecost:

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 (LG IV).

As the divine fire exercises its “redemptive” effect, the poetry is restored from linguistic breakage to an “incarnational” speech, a prophetic expression of the human-divine relationship. In this language human misrepresentation has no part. That the dove “breaks the air” in its descent suggests a breaking up of the atmosphere, or of limited human experience; moreover, the promised discharge from “sin and error” specifically purges the language of misrepresentation – “the natural sin of language” (Eliot qtd Murray 72). What the resulting language “declares” is only that which is taken from the tongues of flame, indicative here as at Pentecost of spiritual reality delivered to a human

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<sup>17</sup> As I take it, the balance between “un-being and being” is realized not only in the “impossible union / Of spheres of existence” in the Incarnation but also in the “moment in and out of time” – experience of timelessness and temporality. The “shaft of sunlight” is also part of the “moment in and out of time” and suggests the brief human experience of timelessness.

audience. The language once purified is a language that expresses spiritual meaning in comprehensible words and grammar. Its discovery prompts the poet to reflect that “We only live, only suspire / Consumed by either fire or fire” (LG IV),<sup>18</sup> an echo of the immediately-preceding choice to “be redeemed from fire or fire.” The doubled imagery of fire reminds the reader that “our existence is either hell or purgatory” (Moody 257), the punitive fire of Hell or the purifying one of God. As the poetry is “consumed” in this fire, the language is purified from its damnable linguistic breakage and restored to new spiritual significance, an “incarnational” unity of spiritual meaning and human speech.

Importantly, this passage does not merely describe the “incarnational” unity achieved but embodies such unity, communicating a distinctly spiritual experience in words chosen and arranged by the human poet. At the heart of this passage is the poet’s own spiritual experience, and the relationship between humanity and God that centers the *Quartets*. The promised “discharge from sin and error” is a message both of salvation and of poetic purification, experienced by the poet himself; moreover, the “choice” required captures not only a general human response to divine action but also the poet’s own “slow difficult ascent . . . upwards” (Murray 86) towards spiritual meaning – both in his life, and in his poetry. Importantly, this message is “declared” by the dove, traditionally the representative of God, and so the “descent” of this dove upon the poet himself evokes the discovery of authentic spiritual meaning in the text, the consummation of the *Quartets*’ exploration of spiritual reality. Although so clearly devoted to the theme of spiritual experience, the words used to describe this experience are entirely the poet’s own. He does not quote or paraphrase any biblical passage, and

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<sup>18</sup> Traditionally, critical work on the *Quartets* connects this fire to the air-raids and V-2 bombs that threatened London during World War II. There is no doubt that the urgency and danger of the war lent a great deal to the final *Quartets*, yet the fires of war seem insufficient to express the spiritual meaning that inspired these lines. A.D. Moody notes that “the places which also are the world’s end were not, in Eliot’s mind, the wartime scenes that would have been one’s first thought in 1942” (238), and in fact the war acts in much the same way as a backdrop to the poetry, providing crucial context but directing attention upwards towards the real “world’s end” of meaningful spiritual experience, or as Spencer puts it, “the end which is God, the end approached by saints” (15). As I suggest here, the fires seem better interpreted in terms of the purifying relationship between God and man.



there are no quotation marks to indicate the particular words spoken by the dove. As spiritual meaning resonates in a human voice, the poetry brings together transcendent reality and a language appropriate to human cognition. An echo of the reconciliation between form and meaning in the Incarnation, the rhetorical power not only to express but also to enact this spiritual experience achieves a similar reconciliation. Where “the word of the prophet is the very word of God” (Robertson 45), the words of the poet are words of the human relationship with God, meant not only to explain but embody spiritual experience.

As the *Quartets* near their final lines, the poetry continues to embody spiritual meaning in its own rhetoric. Indeed, the poetry ascends “beyond” a simple explanation of spiritual principles or even of spiritual experience towards a language that enacts this experience, turning communication into a communion mediated through human words and images. The poet reflects in the final stanza of “Little Gidding” that

the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.  
Through the unknown, remembered gate  
When the last of earth left to discover  
Is that which was the beginning (LG V).

Alluding to the mystical ending of direct perception and the beginning of spiritual illumination, the poetry discovers in mystical imagery the potential for an “incarnational” prophetic discourse wherein the language not only addresses but exemplifies spiritual experience. At first glance, the passage concentrates primarily on addressing spiritual topics, particularly the poetic experience of the *via negativa* and the “exploration” of spiritual reality. As the poet describes a return to “where we started,” he describes a return to Eden and to the lost innocence of the Garden. More particularly, this return is the return of spiritual communion between the believer and God. The image of “children in

the apple tree” evokes a condition similar to that before the Fall, when the forbidden fruit (conventionally an apple) was as yet un-eaten and human beings existed in a child-like purity. As the only human presence in the passage, these children signal a general potential for spiritual renewal – a renewal that claims center stage in the passage and commands the poet’s use of language.

At the same time, the poetry is not satisfied merely to describe spiritual renewal; indeed, the passage embodies this renewal in its own rhetoric, again exemplifying the “incarnational” unity approximated in the prophetic discourse of the *Quartets*. The return to “where we started” is not only personal but also poetic in nature, as the passage revisits images that characterized earlier poems in the *Quartets* – the “beginning” of its linguistic exploration – and renews the spiritual potential of those images. As Ronald Schuchard notes, the experience described is rich in “images recalled from earlier poems” and here meant to convey “the pressure of intense experience” – the poetic ascent towards the divine realm. Among these images, Schuchard lists the “remembered gate” and “the hidden waterfall,” and the “imaginary ‘children in the apple-tree’ (77); these images evoke the progress “[t]hrough the first gate, / Into our first world” (BN I) and the “leaves . . . full of children” (BN I), renewing and elaborating on the undefined significance that those images conveyed. In returning to these images, the poetry enacts the spiritual renewal described in this passage and so realizes a junction between rhetorical form and meaning, indicating the “incarnational” quality increasingly present in the *Quartets*. As with the poet’s description of the “dove descending,” this “incarnational” poetry is not only a communication of spiritual experience but is itself that communion, uniquely accessible in human form to the audience as in true prophetic discourse.

In the final lines of “Little Gidding,” the poetry looks forward to the full brilliance of that incarnational language which it shadows here, a language in which perception is immediate and words and meaning perfectly restored to that “original plenitude” in which they could “not . . . be

distinguished” (Culler 19). This anticipated moment depicts both the eventual perfection of an incarnational language – and, with it, the perfection of spiritual experience communicated – and the guarantee of continued spiritual significance in poetry, when written as “a humble shadow of the Incarnation.” The poet reflects that

[A]ll shall be well  
And all manner of thing shall be well  
When the tongues of flame are in-folded  
Into the crowned knot of fire  
And the fire and the rose are one (LG V).

At this point, the “ascent” of language prefigured throughout the *Quartets* is made complete, the poet’s “humble shadow of the Incarnation” illuminated by the brightness of God. The unity between “the fire and the rose” is all-important: images that recall the “rose” of Dante’s heaven and the “tongues of flame” belonging to meaningful language, their union here implies the perfect dissolution of human language into spiritual experience, a plenitude in which form and meaning are “one.” A crucial element in this unity is the “crowned knot of fire,” an image that alludes to the communion between God and the saints at the close of Dante’s *Paradise*. Placed at the end of the *Quartets*, the image looks beyond the closing line to the completion of the poetic ascent in heaven. There, the poet anticipates a unity between word and experience, in which “all shall be well” at last. Taken from of Lady Julian of Norwich, this promise hinges on mystical praxis, implying that only as the poetry ascends through the *via negativa* is the prophetic mode realized. As the appropriation of mystical and prophetic discourse enables the poetry to begin its ascent towards spiritual meaning, the ascent is completed within the context of the *via negativa*, as the poetry reaches the point of “true, mystical illumination” (Murray 81) that St John of the

Cross identified as the goal of mystical practice – a goal mysticism shares with prophetic discourse. Unreachable in the *Quartets* themselves, this anticipated illumination becomes in Heaven immediately present to human consciousness, an “incarnational” reconciliation of form and meaning.

Although this day lies far in the future and indeed beyond death, the promise of this perfection guarantees the continued significance of that “humble shadow” in poetry written in this life. The allusion here to the Christian Incarnation, and to the poet’s own status related to that moment, reassures Eliot of the ability to enact “the intersection of the timeless moment” (LG I) in human language. As Helen Gardner notes, these final lines echo “the reminiscence of the . . . Trinity at the close of the *Paradiso*” (224) – the glimpse that Dante has of “[t]he universal Being of this band” (33.91) reproduced in the *Quartets* as the union of fire and rose. This half-realized glimpse of the Incarnation stands as the climax of the *Comedy*, assuring Dante (and his reader) “that this Christ is with us still, abiding with the faithful, making them like unto himself” (Esolen 489). In the *Quartets*, this glimpse assures the poet of the continued presence of Christ, a guarantee that his poetry also will be “made like unto” an incarnational language. Indeed, the imagery itself reaffirms this expectation. As the “tongues of flame” merge into the “fire” of God, the fire of Eliot’s poetry answers to the divine fire and so the poetry evokes in its human words, which once communicated only a “chimera” of spiritual meaning, the transcendent “intersection of the timeless / With time.” Analogous to the Incarnation of Christ, the lesser “incarnational” language here makes spiritual experience accessible in human form for the audience, “a ‘communication’ that is also “a form of communion” (Moody 245) and a consummation of the prophetic mode.

In the end, the “incarnational” poetry realized in the *Quartets* achieves their prophetic aims as well – the communication of spiritual experience in words suitable to human comprehension. A milestone along the ascent towards spiritual meaning, the incarnational language lays linguistic breakage to rest and anticipates in the future a perfected and immediate expression of spiritual reality. In between these two poles, Eliot’s own “incarnational shadow” both explains and embodies the reality of spiritual experience, translating that reality into a form accessible to a human mind and tongue. Where “Burnt Norton” lamented that “Words strain / Crack and sometimes break” (BN IV) beneath the difficulty of speaking of spiritual experience, the expectation of the incarnational language, and the realization of its “humble shadow” in the *Quartets*, employs words that no longer break but act out meaningful spiritual experience. As the poet translates his experiences into speech, the poetry gives way to a prophetic voice in which “the past and future / [a]re conquered, and reconciled” (DS V) into a single communicative whole. In the *Quartets*, this “humble shadow of the Incarnation” – the essential prophetic voice – explores and enriches the human relationship with God and also anticipates a moment of perfection still in the future, in which God communicates himself directly to humankind.

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## **Appendix A - Copyright Information**



# FOUR QUARTETS

T. S. ELIOT

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