

Ron Dart
St. Stephen's University

T.S. Eliot and *Four Quartets*: The Wisdom Way

ABSTRACT

This essay explores T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets as a poetic embodiment of wisdom, spiritual maturity, and cultural renewal in response to the fragmentation of Western civilization following World War I. Through detailed commentary on each quartet—Burnt Norton, East Coker, The Dry Salvages, and Little Gidding—the analysis situates Eliot's work within both classical and Christian traditions, drawing connections between Heraclitus's concept of Logos, St. John's Gospel, and Erasmus's translation choices. The essay traces Eliot's intellectual and spiritual evolution, his integration of theology, poetry, and cultural critique, and his challenge to the reductionism of modernity. The Four Quartets, it is argued, offer a path toward personal and civilizational transformation grounded in humility, sacramental awareness, and the unitive fire of divine love.

Keywords:

T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets, Logos, Christian Humanism, Cultural Renewal

INTRODUCTION: ELIOT AND THE FRAGMENTED WEST

T.S. Eliot emerged as a poetic, literary, religious, and philosophic presence after the carnage and tragedy of WWI—some called this the “lost generation”. Such a period of time was aptly summed up by Hemingway in his classic novel, *The Moveable Feast*¹, or Yeats not to be forgotten or ignored poem, *The Second Coming*²—such memorable lines as “the best lack all conviction and the worst are full of passionate intensity” or “the centre cannot hold / mere anarchy is loosed upon the world”, warning messages inscribed on the wall of our culture and civilization. I could also mention Thomas Mann's classic, *The Magic Mountain*³, as a symptom of the same dissipated ideological ethos. The West had, increasingly so, lost any notion of what it meant to be human, the core and centre imploded, fragmentation and identity politics the norm. How were the most insightful and sensitive to navigate the inclement cultural weather, find

1 Hemingway, Ernest. 1964. *Ernest Hemingway. A Moveable Feast*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons.

2 Yeats, William Butler. 1920. *The Second Coming*. *The Dial*. Volume LXIX, Jul-Dec, p. 466. Edited by Scofield Thayer. New York, N.Y.: The Dial Publishing Company.

3 Mann, Thomas. 1924. *Der Zauberberg*. Berlin: S. Fischer.

some solid shoreline and disembark so they could think and live a more human and humane life that embodied the common good as articulated in the fullness and dialogical nature of the Great Tradition? In short what did it mean to care for, tend, and love what it meant to be human, or to be philanthropic?

Most of Eliot's poems in the 1920s very much embodied and reflected the divided inner soul within the lives of the cultural canaries; despair, cynicism and a minimal lack of focus or direction being the ongoing reality. The publications that, in chronological order, reflect Eliot's deep immersion in the disoriented and lost generation, from *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1917)⁴, *Gerontion* (1920)⁵, and *The Wasteland* (1922)⁶ to *The Hollow Men* (1925)⁷, articulate, in the most compelling manner, the sheer lack of what it means to be human in a mature manner and what it means to deteriorate, in many ways, into Dante's Inferno, Dante a definite mentor to Eliot. It is important to note, though, that even though much of Eliot's poetry in the 1920s reflected the ennui and disorientation of the post WWI generation, his article in 1919, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*⁸, pointed to a classical vision of the self and society in which the individual only has a fullness to their soul and thinking to the degree they realize that they are part of a larger Tradition they can draw from and interpret for their times and ethos. And so, the tension of Eliot in his thinking, philosophy, and literary output of the 1920s, which reflects a disoriented and lost generation, is but a reflection of one way that self and society can take, but those who are immersed in Tradition know their individual tendencies and leanings, when viewed from the fullness of the human journey, are limited and can be enriched by drawing from ancient wells also. It was these ancient and life-giving wells that Eliot turned to in the late 1920s to both critique the reductionism of his generation and point to a much larger vision of the greater and higher good.

ACT I IN ELIOT'S CHRISTIAN PILGRIMAGE

The turn by T.S. Eliot in the late 1920s to Christianity occurred about the same time as the turn by C.S. Lewis to Christianity. Sadly so, Lewis and the Inklings often dismissed and mocked Eliot throughout most of the 1930s into the mid-1940s, and Eliot would not publish the writings of Lewis and the Inklings. It was Charles Williams that brought Eliot and Lewis together for a dinner at Oxford in 1945, where both men realized they were climbing the same mountain but from different places. Dinner done, Williams died the next day and Lewis and Eliot became close friends until Lewis' death in 1963. Both men worked on an updated version of the Psalter from the Coverdale Bible. But, back to Eliot's journey to Christianity.

4 Eliot, T. S. 1917. The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock. *Prufrock and Other Observations*, 9-16. London: The Egoist.

5 Eliot, T. S. 1920. Gerontion. *Ara Vus Prec*, 11-18. London: The Ovid Press.

6 Eliot, T. S. 1922. The Waste Land. *The Dial, July-Dec. Volume LXXIII*, 473-85. Edited by Scofield Thayer and Gilbert Seldes. Greenwich, Connecticut: The Dial Publishing Company.

7 Eliot, T. S. 1925. The Hollow Men. *Poems 1909-1925*, 123-8. London: Faber & Gwyer.

8 Eliot, T. S. 1919. Tradition and the Individual Talent. *The Egoist*. Vol. 6, Sept., No. 4, 54-5, & Dec., No. 5, 71-2.

Eliot began a series of annual poems in 1927 called the Ariel Poems. There were six poems in the series each dealing directly or indirectly with Christianity:

1927: Journey of the Magi⁹

1928: Song of Simeon¹⁰

1929: Animula¹¹

1930: Marina¹²

1931: Triumphal March¹³

1954: Cultivation of Christmas Trees.¹⁴

Each of these poems reflect, from a variety of angles, Eliot's ever deeper probes into the Christian vision from either an explicit or implicit direction. And, in 1928, *For Lancelot Andrewes*,¹⁵ the book containing a series of essays that point to Eliot's interest in both the Caroline Divines and other significant thinkers. It was, though, Eliot's "conversion poem", *Ash Wednesday* (1930)¹⁶ that, in much compact depth and detail, clarified his understanding of the layered nature of the process of inner transformation and the life of wisdom and love as the highest virtues on the journey. And, *Thoughts After Lambeth* (1931)¹⁷ made it obvious that Eliot's faith journey was not just a private, creedal, or parochial one. Eliot realized that spirituality if not grounded in the life of the church could become yet another distraction and diversion, Lambeth being the largest gathering of Anglicans to consult and articulate a global vision of the Anglican way.

We can see, then, that Eliot's early turn to Christianity from 1927-1931 took him ever deeper, but also ever more public in a variety of unfolding ways. Eliot published in many genres including literary criticism, dramas, poetry, social and political commentary, ecclesial reflections, volumes of letters, and ironic and timely humour. And many there were, I might add, who turned on Eliot as he turned to Christianity, his critics assuming Christianity was over and done, a relic of the fading past. But, to Eliot's classic poetic vision of refinding and rebuilding the broken ways of Christendom and Christianity, and recovering the centre that Yeats had lamented was gone and could not hold, Eliot held high the chalice of the Great Tradition in all its nuanced, subtle, probing, and layered reality.

9 Eliot, T. S. 1927. *Journey of the Magi*. London: Faber & Gwyer.

10 Eliot, T. S. 1928. *A Song for Simeon; Drawings by E. McKnight Kauffer*. London: Faber & Faber.

11 Eliot, T. S. 1929. *Animula; Wood Engravings by G. Hermes*. London: Faber & Faber.

12 Eliot, T. S. 1930. *Marina; Drawings by E. McKnight Kauffer*. London: Faber & Faber.

13 Eliot, T. S. 1931. *Triumphal March; Drawings by E. McKnight Kauffer*. London: Faber & Faber.

14 Eliot, T. S. 1954. *The Cultivation of Christmas Trees*. London: Faber & Faber.

15 Eliot, T. S. 1928. *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order*. London: Faber & Gwyer.

16 Eliot, T. S. 1930. *Ash-Wednesday*. London: Faber & Faber.

17 Eliot, T. S. 1931. *Thoughts after Lambeth*. London: Faber & Faber.

Heraclitus

The *Four Quartets* was published in 1943¹⁸, but the first of the quartets, “Burnt Norton”, was published separately in 1936¹⁹. I will, though, for the sake of limited space, deal with the *Four Quartets* as a finished and completed poem, a compact and demanding poem, yet packed with dense wisdom and insight for the journey. And just as a musical quartet brings together four instruments—people whose produced sound makes for a united vision, so Eliot’s *Four Quartets* is meant to be read in the same way.

The entrée to the *Four Quartets* is two aphoristic quotes from Heraclitus. The translations of these short reflections have been done in different ways, but the initial quote, differently nuanced in translations, consciously so, contrasts the way of the *Logos* (presencing of reality that comes to one and all if they are attentive) with *Phronesis* (those who interpret—misinterpret the *Logos* to serve and indulge egoistic and narcissistic ends and purposes). Much of *Four Quartets* is an extended commentary on two paths walked and two destinations reached as a result of different trails taken. The second shorter aphorism by Heraclitus highlights how the path taken both up and down is much the same, the path taken the dominant metaphor. What then the relationship between the *Logos-Phronesis*, paths taken and destinations reached?

Burnt Norton

“Burnt Norton” is the pathway into *Four Quartets* and there are five poems in this section as there are in the other poems. The literal and historic approach to the poem notes that Eliot and Emily Hale visited the estate that Sir William Keyt burned to the ground in 1741. But the metaphor of the destroyed manor can also be read as the burning and destruction of the estate of historic western thought and civilization that Eliot and peers were living with as part of the lost and disoriented generation. This conscious destruction of centuries of beauty, order and culture had, understandably so, left his generation nothing but ashes with no sense of the grandeur of what once was and why it was.

This is why Burnt Norton: 1 begins with “Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future”. There is the past of what Burnt Norton was and time present for what it is—both walk a culture into the future and what such a future might be. There is the idealized and romanticized past that Eliot discerningly dissects in Burnt Norton: 1 that distorts historic reality but is the “deception of the thrush”. Indeed, “human kind / Cannot bear very much reality” in all its layered and complex realities, so the longing to refind the centre and live from it can also distort and selectively interpret, in a sanitized way, the time past—this is often a temptation of conservatives as they lament time present and its dismissal of the past and the implications of doing so.

18 Eliot, T. S. 1943. *Four Quartets*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.

19 Eliot, T. S. 1936. Burnt Norton. *Collected Poems, 1908–1935*, 183–191. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.

Burnt Norton: 2 drills into the complex and at odds nature of the human soul and society, “Garlic and sapphires in the mud”, the human condition, nature, animals, and the constellation torn between contradictions and a deeper pattern that is “reconciled among the stars.” It is, though, the tension between “the still point of the turning world” in the midst of what seem to be contradictions—the contemplative and the active; the active, when rightly understood, the pathway into the core and centre, the still point that reconciles the seemingly irreconcilable tensions. The deeper experience of such a way of seeing and being is described in an intricate and truer to deeper experienced way, the deeper dive in *Burnt Norton: 2* needing many a lingering and meditative read.

Burnt Norton: 3 is a conscious contrast to Burnt Norton: 2, the latter the pathway to depth and a heeding of the *Logos*, the former a being uncritically immersed in the *Phronesis* of modernity and postmodernity and its multiple mirages and distractions. The graphic and not to be forgotten metaphors in Burnt Norton: 3 cannot but remind the reader of Dante’s *Inferno*, addictions to the fleeting and transient, blown higher, thither and yon by the irrelevant “distracted from distraction by distraction / Filled with fancies and empty of meaning”. But, for those who see their lives, increasingly so, empty of meaning, hollow men and women, living in a wasteland, the home and mansion of their soul burned to the ground and in ashes, the finale to Burnt Norton: 3 offers a pathway out of the carnage and devastation. It is in a letting go of such thinness and destructive ways that a new beginning can be made—“descend lower” into the darkness that will, in time, be the light out of the cave.

Burnt Norton: 4 brings such a transition into challenging focus. There is the dark night of the soul in which “Time and the bell have buried the day, / The black cloud carries the sun away.” And there can be a sense of desertion and isolation in which the sunflower, clematis, fingers of yew, and Kingfisher’s wing pull the soul in different directions. Yet there is light ahead on the path—indeed “the light is still / At the Still point of the turning world”—the *Logos* of light and the light of *Logos*, ever present and presencing.

Burnt Norton: 5 clarifies, in sharp relief, the tensions, clashes and the difficulties between various types of interpretive words (*Phronesis*) and the presencing of the *Logos*.

[...] Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.

And there is also: “The Word in the desert / Is most attacked by voices of temptation.” How is the eternal Word—the *Logos*—to be properly heard amid so many counterfeits? For Eliot, there is always a pattern of reality that strains to be seen and heard, acted upon and realized—a pattern that is itself movement, “as in the figure of the ten stairs” (John of the Cross being given the nod). It is Love, though, that is the highest “Between un-being and being, / Sudden in a shaft of sunlight” that, if attentive, illuminates much and directs the restless

heart, mind, and imagination to the deeper rebuilding of Burnt Norton, the mansion and manor of the soul and society. What then is the next phase for Eliot in the rethinking of the place of the centre still point, and how to live from such a place in the moving and turbulent world? Such is the pathway to walk to East Coker.

East Coker

East Coker in Somerset, England is where Andrew Eliot (Eliot's line and lineage) left England in 1669 and sailed to the Massachusetts colony. The parish church in East Coker (St. Michael and All Angels') is where Eliot's ashes are housed. Such connections highlight for Eliot and the reader the connection between time past, time present, time future. We are all, whether aware of it or not, part of a larger unfolding historic drama—such was the theme and thesis of Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent".

East Coker: 1 observes the rising and falling, waxing and waning of human projects and plans over the decades and centuries, hopes and dreams, goals accomplished, new goals articulated—and to what purpose such straining and building for what will be, in time, demolished and forgotten? "Houses rise and fall" or "Houses live and die" houses being both buildings and people. And, if a person was to observe the ritual of peasants dancing, men and women coming together, children birthed, Nature's ever shifting seasons, who is this person who dwells in such a short period of time, then is gone? We are all, whether we consent or not, on the perennial wheel of time as it ever turns and turns, waxing for short period of time, waning, then gone—what remains? What is worth the building when all that is built will perish and be replaced? Needless to say, such a perspective can lead to a sort of folding of the hands and wondering why bother doing anything. But there is more if the next steps on the upward and downward path are to be walked; this view from the trail must be noted and not ignored.

East Coker: 2 turns again to the vagaries of Nature and the message of the Constellations, both forms of knowing and being part of learning how to navigate the journey of time. Such a poetic approach with which Eliot began East Coker: 2 he needs to rethink—it's too epic and bordering on the melodramatic. Is it to elders we should turn for wisdom, their autumn years, in principle, meant to bear fine fruit? And yet, many are the elders that have not dug deep, have not allowed the Logos to live in them, to shape and form, mature and make them what they could have been. Eliot sums up various ways of being deceived. This section ends with sagacious advice as the path upward and downward ever continues:

The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.

The houses are all gone under the sea.

The dancers are all gone under the hill.

This advice by Eliot is elementary yet often, too often, ignored—don't be attached or addicted to the transient, for all, in time, will go under—humility, when rightly understood, reveals such an obvious reality.

East Coker: 3 walks the reader into yet deeper darkness, yet fuller light, the shakers and makers of industry, intellectual class, and political elite all have their day in the sun, then are gone. The seeming light must be seen as darkness until the fuller light can be seen. And so “O dark, dark dark. / They all go into the dark”. What path to be taken, then? Eliot offers three poignant illustrations in this transition season between seeing the darkness as light and the true and purer light. What seems to be the darkness of God is the beginning of light—just as when lights in a theater go out, there is a temporary darkness before the fuller screen is lit up, or when a subway stops between destinations in the dark, the dark is temporary, next station light again. Or, under ether seeing yet not seeing until the ether wears off, healing accomplished. This brings Eliot to his reversal of a deeper seeing, of a being wary of hoping but for the wrong things, having faith in the wrong things, loving the wrong things, and even being hesitant of trusting how we think. The task of learning how to wait, be still, and bracket even thinking, “for you are not ready for thought”, points, aptly and wisely, four times to “You must go by...” This going reverses the socially accepted places to go for meaning and purpose—there is much letting go, reseeing and rebuilding from another place and foundation, the seeming wisdom of *phronesis*, not that of the *Logos*. East Coker: 3 is one of Eliot's most compact and incisive poems on soul formation and an alternate way of seeing, and what will be seen and lived from such a pathway and place arrived at.

East Coker: 4 builds on East Coker: 3. How is such a path to be walked, both up to what must be seen and down again, the path the same both up and down. East Coker: 4 is significantly Christological (Christ the Divine “wounded surgeon”) his healing art bringing health and life again to those that are, in fact, deeply ill. Often, “our sickness must grow worse” before we visit the Divine Physician, “The whole earth is our hospital / Endowed by the ruined millionaire”. East Coker: 4, given the fact Eliot's ashes are at the parish church, ends with the eucharist as the Divine medicine and the suffering of Easter Friday the pathway forward.

The dripping blood our only drink,
The bloody flesh our only food:
In spite of what we like to think
That we are sound, substantive flesh and blood—
Again, in spite of that, we call this Friday good.

Just as each of the poems in East Coker strategically and consciously build on one another, the musical concerto, four quartets, five significant songs intertwined, so East Coker: 5 brings the sacramental journey to an end and close. “So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years— / Twenty years largely wasted”. And so begins the Dante like journey, language ever an imperfect instrument for Eliot's “raid on the inarticulate”. There is a sense in which Eliot, when dealing with the larger, ultimate issues, leans in the direction of the *via*

negativa or the *apophatic way*. There is an unfolding mystery on the pathway up and down, but there is a trail nonetheless. But on such a journey, there are the resources of those who have thought and lived lives, but such a recovery is the task of each generation. “There is only the fight to recover what has been lost / And found and lost again and again”. And “there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.” And the *fini* to this poem, yet again, about the faithful journey.

Old men ought to be explorers
Here and there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion

Such is, in many ways, the end and *telos* of the pilgrimage. The contrast between the fire razed world of Burnt Norton and the parish church of St. Michael and All Angels’ in East Coker brings to the fore what has been deconstructed, the slow process of creatively rebuilding, and the small yet new life emerging from the local level of the parish and parish church in East Coker.

The Dry Salvages

Those who enjoy kayaking can launch from Rockport (just east of Boston) and paddle their way to the dry salvages; tides coming and going, but the dry salvages never submerged in the rising tide, birds aplenty on the white rocks. Such are the poignant metaphor and poems in this section of *Four Quartets*.

The Dry Salvages: 1 Eliot walks the reader into the ongoing life of Nature, the attempts by Humans to dominate and control Nature; and yet the best of technical skills, when Nature demands its due, are feeble and weak. The theme of water as ever in movement, ever an obstacle to human industry, ever the life of fishermen, ever lost lives in such lives lived in ocean storms—in short, the sheer fragility of human making, dominance and control. There are the warning bells and buoys humans can make and create, but even then not enough to ease the worries of our all too human tragedies and losses that Nature will bring. Can humans rise above, like the dry salvages, the destructive tides of life, the painful consequences of Nature when fully unleashed?

The Dry Salvages: 2 enters the deeper world of Nature bringing the tragic into the human journey, and how humans process such realities on their ongoing journey. There seems “no end of it, the voiceless wailing, / No end to the withering of withered flowers”. And so, what is Eliot to make of the pattern that once seemed to explain much when the tragic shreds such a pattern, a discarded image that Lewis once so defended? The Dry Salvages: 2 is a longer drawn out poem on time and its ravages, the relentless reality of destruction and the grief of human pain, multiple images and metaphors summoned forth by Eliot to walk the reader to such painful places. And the dry salvages and life there? Where are they to be found? The kayak journey to the salvages asks much effort, ever more so if waves and wind from the shore line are more demanding.

The Dry Salvages: 3 introduces the reader to the Indian god Krishna and Krishna's sagely advice about the future being a "faded song" and the poem ending with Krishna's advice to Arjuna about "On the field of battle. / Not fare well, / but fare forward, voyagers." The Dry Salvages: 3 is in many ways a sustained critique of the naïve liberal notion of history as progress, the ability and technical skills of humans to overcome the seeming brutality and uncertainties of life. Eliot shared with many of his generation a sustained critique of history as an ever unfolding ascent and optimism. As Krishna rightly noted, the actual journey is a battle, and it is on this field humanity must "fare forward" (a term often used by Eliot). Eliot walked the tightrope between the tragic and comedic way of life and the dry salvages articulate the complex nature of living such a trying tension, the ebbs and flows of life, tides rising and falling, dry salvages often faint patches to be salvaged in the storms of life.

The Dry Salvages: 4 returns to a distinctly religious theme, "Lady, whose shrine stands on the promontory". Again, the image of the sea and lives lost, families grieving as a result, communities shattered. There is, though, and from such a place and position, the dry salvages can be seen and steadied on, the "figlia del tuo figlia" and "Perpetual angelus".

The perpetual angelus can be interpreted by Eliot in a variety of ways—the fog bell floating on the ocean, warning sailors, Incarnation of Christ in the midst of human suffering, and the Roman Catholic commemoration of the incarnate Christ done with the ringing of bells. So, for Eliot, there is hope not despair, but a hope that does not ignore the tragic element of life, hope, if heard. There is the ringing of the bells in the midst of suffering, both the resurrected Christ and the East Coker parish church sacramental paths forward, up and down, up to the vision and safety of the dry salvages, bells ringing and angelus, and down to the rages and tragedies of time.

The Dry Salvages: 5 presses into the longings of humanity (mostly misguided) to understand how to read the signs of the times—so many distractions and false conclusions to such deciphering attempts. Both at the larger political and global level, or the much smaller personal and interpersonal levels, "The point of the intersection of the timeless / With time," Eliot suggests "is an occupation for the saint". But why only the saint and not those who do not go through the fire of purgation, illumination, and union? The difference between the saint and the average person, often distracted by one distraction after another, unfocussed and lacking minimal discipline, is "a lifetime's death in love, / Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender." And so, in many ways, dry salvages are those saints, those bells ringing, the perpetual angelus, if rightly understood and internalized, that reveals to the attentive the deeper vision of the living Logos in opposition to the deception of the *Phronesis* thrush.

Little Gidding

I was fortunate when at Cambridge in the 1990s to spend some lingering time at Little Gidding—such is Eliot's fleshed out answer, to the ashes of Burnt Norton, the hope of East Coker parish, the dry salvages, and hints of light and life in the

darkness of his ethos. Nicholas Ferrar (1592-1637) and family settled at the deserted Little Gidding site and, in time, turned it into a contemplative community. The Puritans accused it of being Arminian and a protestant nunnery, but its roots were, simply, a classical catholic Anglican way of living the deeper communal life. The patron saint of the Anglican Oratory of the Good Shepherd is Nicholas Ferrar. Why did Eliot end *Four Quartets* with “Little Gidding” and how are these final poems his answer to both the razing of thought and culture as depicted in *Burnt Norton* and hints forward in *East Coker* and *Dry Salvages*?

Little Gidding: 1 opens with “Midwinter spring is its own season”, such a season between what is passing and what soon to be birthed. Such a birthing is about the journey, from various places, diverse beginnings, to this sacred site, many throughout the decades, wartimes and times of peace coming to such a sacramental and holy ground. “And what you thought you came for / Is only a shell, a husk of meaning”. What is deeper than the shell and husk when meditatively lingering at such a place? Much needs to be let go, the load lightened, and it is at Little Gidding that

[...] 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.

Little Gidding: 2 begins with the dying of a passing season; much is ending, metaphors revealing such a reality and yet, in the seeming ending, ends are always beginnings for Eliot. The poet meets a stranger, a sage of sorts. The former teacher of Eliot, in an extended reflection of sorts, hovers with the journey lived, the lessons learned, what the silly and thin, what the substantive. And the imperfect nature of the human pilgrimage is summed up by:

From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit
Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire
Where you must move in measure, like a dancer.

And as quietly as the teacher came

He left me, with a kind of valediction,
And faded on the blowing of the horn.

How then, in such a journey to be trekked, when much has been distorted and minimized, does the poet go about purifying “the dialect of the tribe”?

Little Gidding: 3 meditates on the difference between mature and immature detachment and indifference, and the layered and complex meaning of thoughtful liberation and freedom—so many distortions and counterfeits to see through, and what the role of both memory and the purifying fire in clarifying the differences? The inner reflections for Eliot highlight, all so poignantly, how those, in time, who once opposed and turned on one another, once having crossed the river and on the other side of time, see things in a more reconciliatory manner. In short,

We cannot revive old factions
We cannot restore old policies
Or follow an antique drum.
These men, and those who opposed them
And those whom they opposed
Accept the constitution of silence
And are folded in a single party.

The site of Little Gidding, as history itself, both reflects intense oppositions and polarizations, but the higher union and communion is its iconic gift. And twice in this poem, drawing from Julian of Norwich the much loved saying, “all shall be well, and / All manner of things shall be well.” But this occurs with “the purification of the motive / In the ground of our beseeching.”

Little Gidding: 4 is a shorter poem yet packed with the image of the descending dove, the flame of purification and, in the end, “the choice of pyre or pyre— / To be redeemed from fire by fire.” It is Love, at the end, that purifies, transforms, burns the dross from the gold so the pure gold of our new being will be revealed from being concealed. Such is the message, the deeper the tale of Little Gidding as place, symbol, and icon when understood and internalized.

Little Gidding: 5 begins with a common theme in the various poems: “What we call the beginning is often the end / And to make an end is to make a beginning.” Much is said in this final poem, but the final lines are a synthesis of both Julian and Dante:

And all shall be well and
All manner of things shall be well
When the tongues of fire are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

Such is, when rightly understood, when the doorway of Little Gidding is walked through, the sanctuary and cathedral of the new society, culture, and civilization; those who have been open to be transformed in community into their new being—in some ways, Augustine’s city of God.

Erasmus and *Logos*

It is significant that Eliot begins *Four Quartets* with a quote from Heraclitus and his comparison of *Logos* with *Phronesis*. St. John uses the notion of *Logos* in the 1st verse of *John*. Heraclitus and John spent many of their years in Ephesus. When Erasmus was doing his updated translation of the New Testament and *John*, he translated *Logos* from the Greek to the Latin as “*sermo*” rather than “*verbum*”. Why did Erasmus do this, and what is its relationship to Heraclitus, Eliot’s use of Heraclitus, and *Four Quartets*?

Erasmus chose “*sermo*” rather than “*verbum*” to translate *Logos* for the simple reason that a living and dynamic sermon embodies and incarnates the life of the

teacher speaking living truths into the lives of the listeners—both are engaged in a dialogical and dynamic relationship, *Logos-Sermo*, quite different than the more abstract and more detached way of being, from the transformative experience of living that is internal to ideas, ideas themselves but pointers to life. There is no doubt that the *Four Quartets* is a form of *Logos* embodied as a poetic *sermo*, Eliot speaking soul to soul, heart to heart, mind to mind to his attentive listeners. If the poem is understood as a form of probing insights into the human journey, the dismantling of the west, the burning of its culture, and the slow and wise rebuilding, then *Four Quartets* can be seen as a cultural *Logos-Sermo*, the unitive fire of Divine Love, the highest of all the seven virtues, *Phronesis and verbum*, lower levels of knowing and being needing the purifying fire to become the rose.

Amor Vincit Omnia

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ron Dart taught in the department of Political Science (POLSC), Philosophy (PHIL), and Religious Studies (RELST) at the University of the Fraser Valley (Abbotsford, British Columbia) for almost 35 years. During the 1980s, he was on staff with Amnesty International and worked with the organization for about 15 years. Dart has published more than 40 books, focusing on Canadian High-Red Toryism, Canadian political philosophers Stephen Leacock, George Grant, and European writers such as Hermann Hesse, Jacob Burckhardt, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Currently, he teaches graduate courses at St. Stephen's University in New Brunswick and has been invited to return as professor emeritus to teach a few courses on Western political philosophy at the University of the Fraser Valley for the Winter 2025 semester.

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