

T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* and the Contemplation of Nature

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Abstract

This thesis reads T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* as a dramatization of the progress of the spiritual life as elaborated within early Christianity, moving from praxis, where the soul engages in ascetical practice in an effort to cleanse itself of passions; through the contemplation of nature, which aims at an understanding of the created world in its cycles of generation and decay; to theologia, or the mystical union with God. The focus in this essay is with the second stage in particular and seeks to better account for Eliot's representation of nature by grounding it in the ascetical and mystical traditions, primarily but not exclusively Christian, that he was most engaged with. It is argued that this deep spiritual structure undergirding the *Quartets* functions to make the reading experience itself a type of spiritual exercise, with the end of cleansing the doors of perception and the discernment of life and beauty amidst a universe of death.

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Abbreviations for the Poetry of T. S. Eliot

Four Quartets

“Burnt Norton” (BN)

“East Coker” (EC)

“The Dry Salvages” (DS)

“Little Gidding” (LG)

Other Poems

“Ash-Wednesday” (AW)

“The Waste Land” (WL)

Quotations from Eliot’s poetry are taken from Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, eds. *The Poems of T.S. Eliot*. 2 vols. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015.

Quotations from Eliot’s critical writings are taken from Ronald Schuchard, ed., *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition*. 8 vols. Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press and Faber & Faber, 2014–2019.

Biblical quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible: King James Version: Standard Text Edition*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

If the doors of perception were cleansed everything
 would appear to man as it is—infinite
 —*William Blake*¹

I

The environmental crisis is in the first place a crisis of vision, and it is one that a “poet of vision” such as T. S. Eliot is peculiarly poised to help us navigate: such is the grounding intuition of this essay.² As Heidegger and subsequent thinkers have shown, we move in a world that is always already interpreted by us, already meaningful for us; we not only see, but see *as*, the frame within which sense data form a “world” existing prior to and conditioning perception. And if this is so, then our actions within that world, including and especially with respect to nonhuman nature, follow logically and inexorably from how it is received, interpreted, and evaluated; “environmental ethics,” writes Bruce Foltz, “entails an environmental aesthetic.”³ But while *ethos* follows from *aisthesis*, it also precedes it, forming and conditioning the interpretive frame, the inextricability of ethics and aesthetics mandating that “the form and content of seeing ... relate to particular ways of being in the world.”⁴ Aesthetic development, increasing one’s sensitivity and openness to the beauty of nature—and so also its demands upon oneself—is on this view directly related to moral development, such that *aisthesis* is equally dependent on *askesis*, the rigorous disciplining of the soul; the lens through which reality appears can become blurry and smudged, can be in need of cleansing in order that the world might again stream through in beauty and truth.

¹ William Blake, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” in *Blake: The Complete Poems*, ed. W. H. Stevenson (Routledge, 2015), Pl.14.77-78.

² Helen Gardner, *The Art of T. S. Eliot*, Faber Paperbacks (1949; repr., London: Faber & Faber, 1979), 184.

³ *The Noetics of Nature: Environmental Philosophy and the Holy Beauty of the Visible* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), xii.

⁴ Norman Wirzba, “Christian Theoria Physike: On Learning to See Creation,” *Modern Theology* 32, no. 2 (2016): 211.

This essay might have been subtitled, “Variations on a theme by William Blake,” as the epigraph given above captures with concision and clarity the central dynamic that I explore in this reading of T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*: namely, the crucial interrelation between the state of the soul and the perception of the natural world. I propose to read the *Quartets* within the tradition of *theoria physike*, or “natural contemplation,” a spiritual exercise developed by the early Christian monastic community as a middle stage in a development that begins in *praxis*, the ascetical discipline that cultivates dispassion and virtue; and culminates in *theologia*, the unitive knowledge of God in undistracted prayer.⁵ The mystic engaged in the contemplation of nature seeks to glimpse, with a vision healed of its “Attachment to self and to things and to persons” (LG 3.3) and so unclouded by acquisitive and instrumentalizing desire, the underlying beauty and order of nature beneath the insubstantiality and change of its phenomenal appearance—“the still point of the turning world” (BN 2.16). The contemplation of nature is a useful hermeneutic tool both for understanding Eliot’s poetics of nature, insofar as it allows us to better account for the structure of *Four Quartets* as itself a type of spiritual exercise; as well as for the crucial link that it makes between ethics and vision, suggesting as it does that our interior dispositions actively shape our perception of the environment. Cleansed of the attachments, desires, and passions that motivate endless acquisition and so drive the relentless exploitation of the natural world, Eliot’s poetry suggests that we can attain to a vision of “the face of eternity shin[ing] through the things of the earth.”⁶

⁵ Eliot’s knowledge of mystical writing was deep and broad, so that in elaborating these and other theological concepts I hope to provide a context for Eliot’s poetry, not a justification of my own beliefs; I hope to elucidate, not impose. In the *Quartets* alone, there are allusions to John of the Cross, Dante, Julian of Norwich, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Cloud of Unknowing*, and other classic spiritual sources. We also know that Eliot had an abiding interest in mysticism from his time at Harvard: his engagement with Evelyn Underhill, from whose *Mysticism* (1911) I could have taken nearly all the background material for this essay, is illuminating in this regard, and his marginalia in his copy of this important book was particularly copious. Cf. Paul Murray, *T. S. Eliot and Mysticism: The Secret History of Four Quartets* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1994), 85 and *passim*.

⁶ Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 57.

In this sections to follow, I will unpack the concept of natural contemplation in more detail, then put it to practical use in reading Eliot's *Four Quartets* as the poetic expression of a spiritual exercise aimed at cleansing the doors of perception and laying bare the infinite depth and beauty of creation. Though I will have recourse to theological speculation in order to contextualize the dynamics I see operative in Eliot's poetry, it is crucial to bear in mind that it is indeed poetry: these are four *quartets*, not four essays or treatises on the spiritual life or its environmental dimensions. And this is to the good: as Pierre Hadot glosses Porphyry of Tyre, abstract teaching by itself is not sufficient to provoke change; rather "we must make sure our studies are accompanied by an effort to make these teachings become 'nature and life' within us."⁷ For Eliot, the vocation of the metaphysical poet (and we might add, philosophical poetry *tout court*) is to "Draw within the orbit of feeling and sense what had previously existed only in thought."⁸ From this perspective, *Four Quartets* is a dramatization of the spiritual life in all its tension, ambiguity, ecstasy, and frustration, drawing theology into lived experience and "cloth[ing] the abstract, for a moment, with all the painful delights of flesh"⁹—a poetic expression that helps to make these abstractions "nature and life" within us, so as to make the reading itself a spiritual exercise.

I mean this quite literally: on my reading of the work, *Four Quartets* is structured as a "therapeutics" that is intended not to inform but to *form*, to heal the soul of the reader, and this through a poetic meditation on the order (and disorder) of nature.¹⁰ As Pierre Hadot, their preeminent student in the twentieth century, writes, spiritual exercises were undertaken by the

⁷ Porphyry, *De Abstinencia*, 1.29–30. Cited in Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Arnold I. Davidson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1995), 100.

⁸ "The Clark Lectures: Lectures on the Metaphysical Poetry of the Seventeenth Century with Special Reference to Donne, Crashaw, and Cowley," *Prose* 2.614

⁹ "The Clark Lectures," *Prose* 2.617

¹⁰ Hadot, 64, 83, 87.

ancient philosopher in order to effect “a profound transformation of the individual's mode of seeing and being,” a “transformation of vision,” precisely.¹¹ The spiritual athlete—for *askesis* properly denotes “training” in all of its dimensions—sought to become liberated from the passions and so raise himself to “an authentic state of life, in which he attains self-consciousness, an exact vision of the world, inner peace, and freedom.”¹² In Hadot’s reading, this is undertaken primarily through an exercise of thought, of imagination, so that “it is thought which, as it were, takes itself as its own object and seeks to modify itself.”¹³ Importantly for my reading of Eliot, Hadot emphasizes the contemplation of nature as a particularly important spiritual exercise in all of the major philosophical schools of antiquity; it is the practice of “physics as a spiritual exercise” that, I argue, underlies the meditation on nature in the *Four Quartets*.¹⁴ Depending on the philosophical school (Stoic, Epicurean, or Platonic), the aim of this contemplation of nature differed in emphasis—to obtain simple pleasure in the beauty of the cosmos, to understand the insignificance of human life, to extinguish individuality and identify with totality—but the practice was shared. I shall show that Eliot engages with all of these aspects, but in particular, *Four Quartets* contemplates nature in order to demonstrate its inadequacy: by forcing the reader to gaze unflinchingly at the world in its becoming, its failure properly to *be*, Eliot’s poetry aims to effect that “metamorphosis of our inner self” that is the objective of spiritual exercise.¹⁵

In its engagement with questions of representation with respect to the natural world, this essay takes an ecocritical approach to the study of Eliot’s poetry, which has been defined broadly

¹¹ Hadot, 83.

¹² Hadot, *ibid.*

¹³ Hadot, 81–82. Hadot clarifies that by “thought” he means not merely the rational faculty but rather “the entire psychism.” Hadot also distinguishes sharply between asceticism as “spiritual exercise” in this sense and the practices of bodily mortification with which we more readily associate this term. Though *Four Quartets* frequently resorts to a vocabulary suggestive of the rigors of physical asceticism (e.g., flames, briars, etc.), the actual practices described in the poetry pertain primarily to the *psyche* and should be read in Hadot’s sense.

¹⁴ Hadot, 101.

¹⁵ Hadot, 83.

as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment,” an “earth-centered” method for interpreting works of literature;¹⁶ but later, more normative formulations have taken aim at certain ways in which this relationship has been figured in works of literature and criticism, and this with a significant bearing on the possibility of reading Eliot ecocritically. In particular, there has been a general rejection of “symbolic” representations of the natural environment, with this understood to be an anthropocentric projection that obscures “material reality” or the “real nonhuman world out there.”¹⁷ Rochelle Johnson, for example, writes of the need to escape the “convenient but confining cultural tendency to understand the natural world as always already symbolic of something other than itself.”¹⁸ This orientation presents a problem for the ecocritical reader of Eliot, who is generally read as more concerned with interior than exterior realities; his landscapes tends to be interpreted as *paysages intérieurs*, the passive recipients and mirrors of human psychological states.¹⁹ This has led some to assert that Eliot is uninterested in the phenomenal world altogether.²⁰ Against previous studies that embrace these psychologized and symbolic representations of nature, such as that of Nancy Duvall Hargrove, ecocritics have begun to resist the suggestion that nature is in the *Quartets* “being translated into terms of Christian symbolism or else used as evidence for the presence of God in the material world”; such a symbolic use of the environment is seen as “problematic because it places non-

¹⁶ Cheryll Glotfelty, “Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), xviii.

¹⁷ Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 4; Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 110.

¹⁸ *Passions for Nature: Nineteenth-Century America’s Aesthetics of Alienation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 192.

¹⁹ Marshall McLuhan, “Symbolic Landscape,” in *T. S. Eliot: Four Quartets: A Casebook*, ed. Bernard Bergonzi (London: MacMillan and Co., 1969), 239.

²⁰ A Alvarez, “A Meditative Poet,” in *T. S. Eliot: Four Quartets: A Casebook*, ed. Bernard Bergonzi (London: MacMillan and Co., 1969), 240.

human forces within a human sphere of reference.”²¹ Any “translation” of “material reality” into states of soul or spirit are read as an anthropocentric projection on the part of poet and/or reader; on this view, symbols are not to be found in nature, itself radically alienated from human consciousness, but are placed there during the creative or interpretive act.

This anti-symbolic orientation has motivated feats of impressive interpretive acrobatics on the part of Eliot’s ecocritical readers, attempting to redeem the poet as a prophet of the essential “autonomy” of nature or even of total “immersion” in its material flux.²² Where they have addressed the *Quartets* at all, such readers tend not to read Eliot’s work on its own terms (which are deemed inadequate to address current environmental concerns for reasons given above), instead choosing to read through the prism of a materialism that the poems themselves militate against. Such is perhaps the case with Elizabeth Black, who is concerned to defend the reality of Eliot’s landscapes against the symbolic uses made of them (“the roses are real flowers in the garden”) and who finds the representation of human embeddedness in nature described in, for example, “East Coker” as affirmation that human life finds its meaning by taking part in its cycles.²³ Etienne Terblanche takes this much further, reading Eliot’s entire *oeuvre* through the lens of New Materialism, a philosophy of radical immanence the fundamental affirmation of which is that “Earth *evidences its own agency* with which human agency intertwines ... Earth is not in need of human will or deistic interference in order for it to move.”²⁴ Terblanche argues that Eliot is “emphatically not [Christian] in any textbook manner”—a fact that the poet, himself a voracious reader and participant in theological debate over the finer points of his Anglo-

²¹ Nancy Duvall Hargrove, *Landscape as Symbol in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1978); Black, *The Nature of Modernism*, 114, 131.

²² Black, 113; Etienne Terblanche, *T. S. Eliot, Poetry, and Earth: The Name of the Lotos Rose*, *Ecocritical Theory and Practice* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 10.

²³ *The Nature of Modernism*, 123, 128.

²⁴ *T. S. Eliot, Poetry, and Earth*, 4. Italics in original.

Catholic faith, would have been surprised to learn—and that “the still point and its flow cannot be reduced to institutionalized images with fixed properties of God the Father within the protestant or even catholic Christian tradition.”²⁵ Having discarded the foundation of his worldview, Terblanche is then free to construct an Eliot that finds elevation through participation in Earth’s “changing, agentic essence,” seeking not salvation traditionally understood but rather an “immersion,” even a “dissolving,” in matter.²⁶ For Terblanche, Eliot imagines a humanity that reaches its final end through a radical participation in the cycles of birth and death, generation and decay, that characterize material existence.²⁷

For reasons that will become more apparent in the sections to follow, I think such interpretations profoundly tendentious, finding the affirmation of certain aspects of our existence on this planet that I believe the logic of Eliot’s poetry regards as deeply ambivalent or else rejects. Eliot is a symbolist through and through, drinking deeply from the wells of *fin-de-siècle* French poetry, and any critical orientation that overlooks this aspect of his imagination must be regarded with suspicion. Instead, I think it more fruitful to question the anti-symbolic tendency within ecocriticism, returning rather to the ancient sense of communion between inner and outer worlds that is expressed so memorably by Eliot’s beloved Baudelaire:

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
 Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
 L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
 Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.
 [...]

²⁵ 20.

²⁶ 188.

²⁷ 114. To be clear, I agree that participation in the rhythms of nature is important for the maintenance of human and nonhuman life on this planet, and even that continuing awareness of these cycles constitutes a meaningful spiritual practice, a crucial insight which I explore in the third section of this essay. Where I depart from the views presented here, and where I think Eliot would as well, is in their assessment of the *valence* of natural change (on their view, overwhelming positive) and consequent assertion that such processes are meaningful in themselves, indeed that human life finds its essential meaning through embracing the flux more deeply.

Qui chantent les transports de l'esprit et des sens.²⁸

Far from liberating nature from the suffocation of human allegorizing, the desire to assert the autonomy of nature from human “spheres of reference” instead renders human and nonhuman alien to one other, no longer “kindred things” (James McGowan’s rendering of *des regards familiers*) but radically disjunct; such a separation in turn relies on a Cartesian sundering of material and intelligible orders that is itself not unrelated to environmental devastation. Moreover, it implies a questionable account of intellect and intelligibility as “human, all too human,” rather than as proceeding from the common ground of both human and nonhuman; to that extent, “What modernist revisionism sees as a “freeing” of nature is just as much a severing of creation from the uncreated, an uprooting of the visible from the invisible.”²⁹ As far back as the Pre-Socratics, however, philosophical and religious thought has felt the “identity of structure” between inner and outer worlds,³⁰ such that “‘cosmology’ was inseparable from ‘psychology.’”³¹ These are the lines along which we must understand the “objective correlative” in the later Eliot, a concept which was, moreover, formulated several years prior to his conversion: not as psychological projection onto an indifferent cosmos, but as psycho-cosmic communion.³² To “translate” nature, then, a move of which contemporary ecocritics are suspicious, amounts to a deep continuity with the ancient belief in an essential relation between soul and world.

²⁸ “Nature is a temple where living pillars / sometimes let out indistinct speech; / Man passes within forests of symbols / which gaze at him with familiar eyes / ... / which sing the transports of spirit and sense” (my translation) “Correspondances,” in *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan (Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1–4, 14.

²⁹ Foltz, *The Noetics of Nature*, 122.

³⁰ Charles H. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus: An Edition of the Fragments with Translation and Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 21.

³¹ Joshua Lollar, *To See into the Life of Things: The Contemplation of Nature in Maximus the Confessor and His Predecessors* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2013), 44.

³² “Hamlet,” *Prose* 2.125; Nancy Duvall Hargrove writes that Eliotean symbols “partake of both the concrete and the abstract, the tangible and the intangible”: *Landscape as Symbol in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot*, 10.

This confidence in the identity of structure between inner and outer worlds—of the human as microcosm—has already brought this essay within an explicitly religious orientation to the study of literature and environment, an aspect of Eliot’s thought that has unfortunately been ignored by ecocritics to this point. This may stem from the coolness, even suspicion, with which environmental thought has regarded Christian belief in the aftermath of Lynn White, Jr.’s seminal “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” which placed the blame for accelerating environmental devastation squarely with Christianity, and more specifically, theological developments within Latin Scholasticism.³³ In expelling the genii, naiads, and dryads from the rivers and forests and setting up instead an absolutely transcendent God, nature was evacuated of the divine (“the nymphs are departed” [WL 175]); this helped to sanction its exploitation, now regarded not as saturated with spirit but as inert material for human use, as well as more intrusive scientific methods—so the story goes, at least. But I have presented White’s view with considerably less nuance than it actually contains, largely because this truncated version has had much more traction in later environmental thought. White himself, in fact, proposes not rejecting Christianity but rather finding resources within it that can assist in constructing a theological understanding of the environment that is adequate to address the ecological crisis (as well as, I would add, moving closer to a truly orthodox understanding of the relation between creation and Creator); as White writes, “Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious.”³⁴

T. S. Eliot shared this conviction. In his 1939 *The Idea of a Christian Society*, he claimed that that “a wrong attitude towards nature implies, somewhere, a wrong attitude towards God.” In his view, the form of perception which produces and is reproduced by a “mechanized,

³³ Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–7.

³⁴ 1207.

commercialized, urbanized way of life” is the fruit of a deeper spiritual sickness, one which views the world as inert material rather than as sacred, a vision rooted in a particular conception of the relationship between humans, nonhuman nature, and God. Against modern materialism, Eliot asserted that “We need to know how to see the world as the Christian Fathers saw it”; and it was for them a grand theophany, simultaneously veiling and manifesting the infinite source and ground of all things.³⁵ In his *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*, Eliot further connected the health of the “material soil” with that of the “spiritual soil,” suggesting—as did White—that the beliefs of a people imply deep, practical environmental consequences and that care for the one means attending carefully to the other.³⁶ For both men, there is no question of rejecting Christianity in the name of ecological renewal; the challenge is rather to articulate a robust and coherent theology that includes an adequate account of the nonhuman.

There have been numerous attempts in recent decades to retrieve a theological understanding of the environment that would address adequately the extent of the crisis and provide meaningful responses to it; the most relevant for the purposes of studying Eliot’s ascetical relationship to nature is the practice of “natural contemplation,” which has formed a well-defined aspect of the Christian spiritual life since the earliest centuries of the Church.³⁷ In making reference to this tradition, I rely in large part on Joshua Lollar’s reconstruction of the dynamics natural contemplation in philosophical and religious practice from Parmenides (c. 6th century B.C.) to Maximus the Confessor (7th Century A.D.), as well as Bruce Foltz’s elaboration

³⁵ *Prose* 5.716

³⁶ *Prose* 6.354

³⁷ At least since Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215 AD), though the roots in Greek philosophy extend to the Pre-Socratics; see Lollar: *To See Into the Life of Things*.

of natural contemplation within the context of modern environmental philosophy and literature.³⁸

The contemplation of nature, in Greek *theoria physike*, is defined by Lollar as

the systematic study but also to the more devotional apprehension of the things of the world and of the world as a whole. It is directed particularly to the knowledge of the world in its generation, growth, change, and movement and seeks to account for the coherence underlying the instability of natural phenomena.³⁹

Given this articulation, the applications to *Four Quartets* are immediately evident: as Morris Weitz writes in his study of “Burnt Norton,” the *Quartets* as a whole are grounded in the “notion of the Eternal or ultimate reality being immanent in the flux as the Logos which anyone can discern, but which only a few do discern”⁴⁰; the poems embody the spiritual practice intended to render this ultimate reality—this coherence underlying our experience of nature’s instability—phenomenally present to the one who has cleansed the doors of perception, seeing the world as “the image of the incarnate Christ,” the Logos.⁴¹

II

As mentioned above, in the early Christian tradition, the spiritual life was thought to progress through three stages: *praxis*, which is concerned with right action and the attainment of dispassion; *theoria physike*, or the “contemplation of nature,” which refers to the “systematic study” and “devotional apprehension” of worldly reality with the aim of understanding “the coherence underlying the instability of natural phenomena”; and finally, *theologia*, the mystical

³⁸ Foltz, *The Noetics of Nature*.

³⁹ *To See Into the Life of Things*, 14.

⁴⁰ “T. S. Eliot: Time as a Mode of Salvation,” *The Sewanee Review* 60, no. 1 (1952): 56.

⁴¹ Lollar, *To See Into the Life of Things*, 133. The *Logos* is of course a major theme in the *Quartets* beyond this “eco-logical” register, or perhaps in rather direct continuity with it, running from the Heraclitean epigraph through the “logo-centric” meditations in the fifth movement of each poem (“Words strain, / Crack and sometimes break”; BN V.13–14).

union with God.⁴² These stages were moreover keyed to three consecutive books of the Old Testament: Proverbs dealt with *praxis*, Ecclesiastes with *theoria physike*, and the Song of Songs with *theologia*.⁴³ Though this essay is concerned to read Eliot's *Four Quartets* as an exercise in natural contemplation, it is crucial to understand what lies on either side of this stage; indeed, Eliot himself is quite concerned with *praxis* in his post-conversion poetry, notably in *Ash-Wednesday* but no less in the *Quartets*. In this section, I will read Eliot's poem "Proverbially," in its engagement with ascetical practice—both his diagnosis of our spiritual condition and the cure that he proposes for it—with particular attention to how these are dramatized poetically, providing not a dry manual for the spiritual life but rather a living enactment and embodiment of it in all its tension and ambiguity.

Before elaborating on these concepts in more detail, it will be helpful to first get a sense of how the problem of distorted vision—and the concomitant distortion in our relation to the natural world—appears in Eliot's poetry. With the rose garden sequence that opens "Burnt Norton," in its embodiment of this ambiguity of human perception, Eliot stages the crisis of vision that is traced through the *Quartets* as a whole. These lines, in fact, represent perhaps the widest hermeneutical division among Eliot's readers; whether the vision in the pool constitutes a genuine mystical experience or a delusion, a trick of the light, none can agree, and there are numerous readings by sensitive critics to support either view.⁴⁴ Consider the invitation to the garden and what Eliot's speaker finds there:

⁴² Lollar, *To See Into the Life of Things*, 14; Joshua Lollar, "The Final Ecclesiast: Leopardi and the Contemplation of Nature," *Costellazioni* 10 (2019): 91.

⁴³ Lollar, "The Final Ecclesiast," 91; Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 57.

⁴⁴ Among the skeptics, one could list Paul Murray, Kevin Hart, and Jewel Spears Brooker; those who read it as a genuine experience of transcendence include Harry Blamires, Nancy Duvall Hargrove, and Hugh Kenner; Cleo McNelly Kearns calls it undecidable. Murray, *T. S. Eliot and Mysticism*; Kevin Hart, "Eliot's Rose Garden: Some Phenomenology and Theology in 'Burnt Norton,'" *Christianity and Literature* 64, no. 3 (2015): 243–65; Jewel Spears Brooker, *T.S. Eliot's Dialectical Imagination*, Hopkins Studies in Modernism (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins

Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,
 Round the corner. Through the first gate,
 Into our first world, shall we follow
 The deception of the thrush? Into our first world.
 [...]
 Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,
 And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
 And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,
 The surface glittered out of heart of light,
 And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.
 Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.
 Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children,
 Hidden excitedly, containing laughter.
 Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind
 Cannot bear very much reality. (BN 1.19–43)

Other than the lotos, the valence of which depends greatly on whether one reads it as Buddhist or Homeric (though surely both resonances are present), the principle interpretive problem seems to arise with the bird: on the one hand, we are told beforehand that the thrush is deceptive, and so are inclined to read what follows with trepidation;⁴⁵ yet we are cast out of the garden precisely because we have gotten near to *reality*, too much of which we cannot bear as human beings. Further, we cannot truly be sure to which aspect of the experience the bird is referring when speaking of this “reality”: the reader, dazzled by the surface as it glitters “out of heart of light,” generally understands the vision in the pool to be what overwhelms; but the bird casts the speaker out of the garden only after the vision has already disappeared, which hardly seems necessary if the “water out of sunlight” is indeed what we “cannot bear,” perhaps suggesting that

University Press, 2018); Harry Blamires, *Word Unheard: A Guide Through Eliot's Four Quartets* (1969; repr., London, New York: Routledge, 2017); Hargrove, *Landscape as Symbol in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot*; Hugh Kenner, “Into Our First World,” in *T. S. Eliot: Four Quartets: A Casebook*, ed. Bernard Bergonzi (London: MacMillan and Co., 1969), 168–96; Cleo McNelly Kearns, *T. S. Eliot and Indic Traditions: A Study in Poetry and Belief* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁴⁵ The scientific name for the Song Thrush is *turdus philomelos*, the species nomenclature a reference to the Greek myth of Philomela, who of course has a prominent position in *The Waste Land* (“The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king / So rudely forced” WL 99–100). The “deception” of the thrush, then, beyond its oft-remarked duplicity in beguiling us with “what might have been,” is perhaps not unrelated to the damage wrought by undisciplined desire, in this case sexual passion. “Song Thrush,” British Trust for Ornithology, accessed April 10, 2020, <https://app.bto.org/birdfacts/results/bob12000.htm>.

this disappearance itself is somehow more real.⁴⁶ Which is it, then: is the vision in the pool illusion or revelation?⁴⁷

W. David Soud has offered what is, to me, the most promising attempt to navigate this particular crux, suggesting that “there is no false vision in the garden. Rather, Eliot is afforded a vision he is not ready to receive.”⁴⁸ The deception of the thrush is similar to that of the serpent in the Genesis story and lies in being offered something before we are meant to have it, something good in itself that becomes poisoned through a disordered relation to it. The problem is one of perception: Eliot has not been prepared spiritually for the glimpse of transcendence he has been vouchsafed and so must turn away, much as Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden after tasting the fruit. The opening of “Burnt Norton” therefore dramatizes a kind of Fall strikingly similar to that which I will elaborate below—a false relation to nature caused by a passionate and idolatrous gaze⁴⁹—and it is the work of the *Quartets* to traverse the postlapsarian condition, to understand nature in a vision free of passion and delusion, and so to attain finally—having undertaken the adequate spiritual preparation—to the mystical vision wherein “the fire and the rose are one” (LG 5.46).

For the Church Fathers, before we can engage freely and lovingly with each other and with creation, we must first be healed of sin, which I will describe here not in legalistic terms—

⁴⁶ This is the interpretation given to this passage by Paul Murray, who writes that the vision expresses “man’s innate tendency to be distracted from what is ultimately most real.” *T. S. Eliot and Mysticism*, 50–51.

⁴⁷ Morris Weitz, whose interpretation of “Burnt Norton” I otherwise find compelling, has attempted to skirt the problem by suggesting that there are in fact *two* birds in question here, one deceptive and one truthful; this speculation seems unwarranted by the text. “T. S. Eliot,” 57.

⁴⁸ *Divine Cartographies: God, History and Poiesis in W.B. Yeats, David Jones, and T.S. Eliot*, Oxford English Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 182.

⁴⁹ In idolatrous vision, “the gaze ceases to overshoot and transpierce itself, hence it ceases to transpierce visible things, in order to pause in the splendor of one of them . . . it no longer experiences things as transparent.” For a phenomenological description of idolatrous and iconic perception, see: Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson, 2nd ed. (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), *inter alia*, 7–24.

the violation of various external prohibitions—but rather an irrational relation to and enslavement by one’s own desires that results in a distorted perception of the world. This is a significant claim from the perspective of environmental aesthetics: for them, the beauty of nature, though given to all, is not received equally by all, requiring first a purification of the passionate gaze. Attachment to created beings, on this view, is a mutual bondage that corrupts the objects of our love and we ourselves, rendering each opaque to the other, a relation indeed not of love but of lust.⁵⁰ On this view, beauty is indeed an objective reality, is the very being of beings, but its apprehension is subjective in that, as the 11th century monk Nikitas Stithatos writes, “the soul’s apprehension of the nature of things changes in accordance with its own inner state.”⁵¹ The passions cause one to perceive things only in their sensuous exterior, not in their depths, the life-giving roots through which they are sustained in the eternal; perceiving only the surfaces of things, the passionate eye disfigures and obscures the reality of beings. Bruce Foltz provides a compelling image of this dynamic: all of nature is a window onto Reality, letting in the clear light of the divine, but the idolatrous gaze can be likened to the twilight hour “when the window pane becomes illumined from inside as the sunlight fades and the lights are switched on,” no longer a window at all but rather a mirror reflecting the narcissistic eye, nature become a depthless surface on which we project and contemplate our own disordered souls.⁵² To see the beauty that is the very life of things, then, requires first a change of heart.

Indeed, the patristic understanding of the Fall described in Genesis was often related to an improper and sinful relation to the natural world. In its mythic expression, the Fall—“Adam’s

⁵⁰ Foltz, *The Noetics of Nature*, xvi; Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind*, 203; Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Preeminent Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (1911; repr., New York: Doubleday, 1990), 153.

⁵¹ *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, vol. 4 (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 93.

⁵² Foltz, *The Noetics of Nature*, 43–44, 54, 126.

curse” (EC 4.9)—is the result of his and Eve’s eating of the forbidden fruit in the garden (Genesis 3:6), but early Christian interpreters such as Maximus the Confessor read this passage as an expression of the failure of natural contemplation.⁵³ Adam attempted to “to know the world by sensation alone and not according to God,” to see nature as self-standing rather than sustained by, and pointing toward, its divine source.⁵⁴ As we shall see in the next section, to invest nature with “an autonomous life-sustained force” is, and here Eliot stands perfectly in line with the interpretive tradition, to bring corruption into oneself, to become dazzled by the play of surface phenomena and so invest one’s desire in what is ultimately insubstantial.⁵⁵ The earth was “endowed by the ruined millionaire” (EC 4.12) not as the result of a sinful action—the eating of a piece of fruit—but as the result of an inordinate desire for that which has no being in itself, a failure to see the temporal in light of its source in the eternal. In these terms, as Bruce Foltz writes, the Fall amounts to a “primal idolatry,” a “clinging to the message, and ignoring the messenger.”⁵⁶ It is precisely a failure of vision.

If the disease is a distorted perception rooted in undisciplined desire, the cure lies in ascetical practice, a major theme of the *Quartets*. This is presented most vividly in the fourth section of “East Coker,” Eliot’s most “metaphysical” of lyrics, structured through the elaboration of an extended Aesculapian conceit. In the opening stanza, we find ourselves on the operating table with Christ, the “wounded surgeon,” exercising His “sharp compassion” as our physician (EC 4.1–4). The second stanza observes that our recovery from spiritual disease will be neither easy nor pleasant, that in fact “to be restored, our sickness must grow worse” (EC 4.10). What is at issue in these lines is the difficulty of the spiritual life and of ascetical practice, the purification

⁵³ Lollar, *To See Into the Life of Things*, 297–306.

⁵⁴ Lollar, 302.

⁵⁵ Lollar, 303; Foltz, *The Noetics of Nature*, 244.

⁵⁶ Foltz, *The Noetics of Nature*, 244.

of desire and so of perception; the only way out is through (“the way up is the way down, the way forward is the way back”; DS 3.6), and the cure may in the beginning feel like a movement *away* from health, a deepening of our sickness, rather than a remedy. As the fourth stanza expresses this:

The chill ascends from feet to knees,
The fever sings in mental wires.
If to be warmed, then I must freeze
And quake in frigid purgatorial fires
Of which the flame is roses, and the smoke is briars. (EC 4.16–20)

Eliot so wonderfully captures the experience of fever in these lines, the paradoxical coincidence of heat and chill in the “frigid purgatorial fires” that precede its breaking; here we submit ourselves eagerly to the flames, as do Dante’s poets in *Purgatorio* XVI, that we might soon be restored. The smoke, which surrounds the flames and meet us first in our movement towards them, is the thorn that wounds, but it is a wounding that is simultaneously a liberation, in that the hard shell of exteriority and egotism is pierced and made permeable. Yet should we make it through this agonizing smoke, we find the flame from which it rises a sweetness and a relief—a rose, precisely. But this does not exhaust the paradox, as we do not return to health that we may live in this world; it is only our hospital, a temporary habitation, and we are healed only in order to “Die of the absolute paternal care” (EC 4.14).

This fierce ascetical imagery reaches a climax in the fourth section of “Little Gidding,” where the “dove descending” offers the choice of either the Holy Spirit or ruination, the Blitz or Pentecost. This is transposed into the idiom of the conquest of desire, as in the conjunction of the Buddha and Saint Augustine in “The Fire Sermon” (WL 308–311). We must burn, we are told, but we may choose in which fire we place ourselves, being saved from destruction only through the conquest of our passionate nature:

Love is the unfamiliar name
 Behind the hands that wove
 The intolerable shirt of flame
 That mortal hands cannot remove.
 We only live, only suspire
 Consumed by either fire or fire. (LG 4.8–14)

We are each of us wearing the Shirt of Nessus, Eliot avers, symbolizing the burning desires of the flesh against which the ascetic sets themselves, a garment woven by a Love that would cleanse and rarify its baser expression, a purification that scalds as the dross is burned away. There is no escape from desire within the immanent frame of mortal life; it is either extinguished in death or perfected in transcendence. The only thing to do is to follow Hercules to the funeral pyre, consumed in “that refining fire / Where you must move in measure, like a dancer” (LG 2.92–93), the purgatorial fires that are the very incandescent love of God.

But it is not all fevers and flames; the healing of consciousness comes in large part through a disciplined withdrawal that is the very absence of sensation, as Eliot expresses it in the third section of “Burnt Norton,” lamenting that in the London Underground there is neither daylight

Nor darkness to purify the soul
 Emptying the sensual with deprivation
 Cleansing affection from the temporal. (BN 3.7–9)

As it is, the tube station offers neither “plenitude nor vacancy” (BN 3.10), is only a dimly lit semblance of real being, offering neither transcendent vision nor the darkness necessary to prepare oneself to receive it. Eliot, though, following Heraclitus’ dictum (given as an epigraph to the poem) that “the way up and the way down are the same,” uses this opportunity to admonish the reader to sink deeper and seek real stillness and true darkness, to

Descend lower, descend only
 Into a world of perpetual solitude,
 World not world, but that which is not world,

Internal darkness, deprivation
 And destitution of all property,
 Desiccation of the world of sense,
 Evacuation of the world of fancy,
 Inoperancy of the world of spirit; (BN 3.25–32)

It is in this way, Eliot implies, in taking “the way down” as far as it leads, that it will be seen to have been “the way up” all along, just as Dante discovers at the conclusion of the *Inferno* when Virgil spins around on Satan’s haunches. Sinking into “internal darkness,” “emptying the sensual with deprivation,” is a crucial step in the purification of the soul. Absence—of light, of sound, of movement—opens a space wherein beings can be perceived in truth, if only for a moment: the daylight that is set in relief by the disciplined cultivation of darkness and silence “invest[s] form with lucid stillness” and “turn[s] shadow into transient beauty” (BN 3.4-5). Finding within oneself a “world not world” in the complete cessation of all sense and imaginative faculties, one is emptied of desire for the things of this world—affection is thereby not destroyed but *cleansed*, purified, that lust might be transfigured in disinterested love.

Asceticism, in fact, at least within the Christian framework for the spiritual life that I am elaborating here, represents a precondition for the contemplation of nature; it is a stage in development that must be passed through in order to free oneself from the tyranny of the senses and properly make use of them, engaging with the world in freedom and love,⁵⁷ much as in Blake’s distinction between seeing “with” the eyes and seeing “through” them.⁵⁸ Eliot was aware of this need for regeneration, writing very soon after conversion in 1927 of his belief in “the spiritual askesis and the discipline and development of the soul,”⁵⁹ and critics have commented on the close parallels between his post-conversion poetry, especially the *Quartets*, and the

⁵⁷ Lollar, *To See Into the Life of Things*, 139, 212.

⁵⁸ William Blake, “The Everlasting Gospel,” in *Blake: The Complete Poems*, ed. W. H Stevenson (Routledge, 2015), 175.

⁵⁹ “Political Theorists,” *Prose* 3.141

asceticism of writers such as John of the Cross.⁶⁰ Though skeptics often find such practices masochistic, spiritual purgation is directed rather toward liberation, and results in a heightened spiritual perception—the very faculty necessary for a proper natural contemplation.⁶¹ As Douglas Christie writes, Christian ascetical practice is a “work of relinquishment and purification by which the broken self is gradually healed, and brought to a new capacity to meet the broken world in openness and freedom and compassion.”⁶² It is the process of removing spiritual distortion—cleansing the doors of perception—in order to see things as they truly are: “both a new world / And the old made explicit, understood” (BN 2.29–30).

This type of spiritual practice is often seen as problematic from an environmental standpoint, however, as world-denying or even subtly Gnostic in tendency. We might call as evidence for this charge Eliot’s favorite mystical writer, John of the Cross, in a passage given as the epigraph to “Sweeney Agonistes”: “Hence the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union, until it has divested itself of the love of created beings.” Even Christie, whose sympathetic description of asceticism is given above, picks out one of the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* for special censure on this point, a passage in which Abba Arsenius says, “If a man sits in silence and hears the voice of a bird, he does not have quiet in his heart; how much more difficult it is for you, who hear the sound of these reeds?”⁶³ Christie responds with vehement disapprobation:

It would be difficult to imagine an attitude less open to the work of cultivating genuine sensitivity and care toward the created world than the one expressed in this saying. Here, it seems, one encounters a very different kind of sensitivity, in which the inner silence cultivated by the contemplative is perceived as so delicate and precious that even the faintest trace of life in the created world is enough to disturb and compromise it.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Eloise Knapp Hay, *T.S. Eliot’s Negative Way* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 155.

⁶¹ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 166–68.

⁶² *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind*, 15.

⁶³ Cited in *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind*, 202.

⁶⁴ 202.

Here are three perspectives, two of which are to be rejected from within the logic of the poem: there is a disordered attachment to the things of this world, which as we have seen represents a form of passionate idolatry that corrupts both those things and we ourselves. But there is also an indifference that rejects them as unworthy of our attention, that does not “cleanse” but rather extinguishes affection—this too is to be renounced. There is only the detachment that is synonymous with love itself in its purest form, “not less of love but expanding / Of love beyond desire” (LG 3.8–9). Only this dispassionate regard allows things to be as they are in truth, and so only in this light can things be truly loved. As Eliot expresses it in the third section of “East Coker,” the “whisper of running streams, and winter lightning, / The wild thyme unseen and the wild strawberry” (EC 3.29–30) are all to be retained and enjoyed; they remain “hints and guesses” (DS 5.29), but they must be referred beyond themselves. They are “requiring, pointing” (EC 3.32), and we must follow them where they lead. Detachment allows us to perceive both the sensuous reality and its transparency to “the original, and originating, beauty of the Creator” and so the fullness and depth of each thing in its own particular beauty, “the true vision of the world.”⁶⁷ But they also, and equally, point to “the agony / Of death and birth,” and we must first traverse the horror of nature in its fallen state before we can glimpse its inner glory.

III

There are in fact two contrasting visions of nature for those engaged in the spiritual life: in the first case, there is the tragic realism of nature red in tooth and claw, and our experience of it, as Bruce Foltz writes, is “one of transience and impermanence,” with the fragility and instability of things foregrounded.⁶⁸ This is the point of view of the Christian ascetic, who “sets

⁶⁷ Foltz, *The Noetics of Nature*, 245; Lollar, *To See Into the Life of Things*, 254.

⁶⁸ *The Noetics of Nature*, 223.

himself against nature with its corrupt and contingent mode of being—nature as generation and corruption.”⁶⁹ The point of this attitude is to not to denigrate nature, but to see it for what it is, to put it in its proper perspective. Humanity yearns to find meaning in existence, but the ascetic attempts to understand that and why nature cannot provide this for us. “Within the flux,” as Morris Weitz summarizes Eliot’s philosophy of time in the *Quartets*, “if nothing else is recognized as more real than it, no experience is any different from any other”; all are therefore “of equal insignificance.”⁷⁰ The significance and beauty of things, for Eliot, comes not from death, as it does for a poet like Wallace Stevens, but neither does it come from a naïve affirmation of “life”;⁷¹ it emerges from the “silence” and “stillness” (BN V.4, 6) beyond the exchange of death and life, the ceaseless flowing of one into the other. Transcending “the agony / Of death and birth” (EC 3.32–33) requires first that we view it unflinchingly. Such indeed was the motivation for the philosophers of antiquity in their practice of physics as a spiritual exercise, as Hadot has shown. It is only after this prior meditation on the insufficiency of the flux, of nature as *samsāra*, that one can pass into the second, contemplative attitude, which will be the subject of the next and final section.

For the Christian tradition, the Book of Ecclesiastes is the paradigm for this first, ascetical vision of nature, which strives to find stability, to find God, within the flux of natural phenomena.⁷² It seeks to cast an unflinching gaze at this ceaseless process of coming to be and passing away, and to discover within the ephemerality of becoming the reality of being that is His very wisdom.⁷³ It is in fact this awareness of the restlessness of things that provides the

⁶⁹ Lollar, *To See Into the Life of Things*, 205.

⁷⁰ “T. S. Eliot,” 52.

⁷¹ “Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her, / Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams / And our desires” (V.3-5). Wallace Stevens, “Sunday Morning,” in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, ed. John N Serio and Chris Beyers, 2015, 71–74.

⁷² Lollar, “The Final Ecclesiast,” 90.

⁷³ Lollar, 91.

impetus for seeking the point at which they come to rest, that provides the conviction that, if the changing is the visible, then real being, the enduring, is the invisible that contains and sustains it.⁷⁴ Cosmic motion—generation and corruption—becomes the backdrop against which the stability at the heart of things emerges,⁷⁵ which Eliot encapsulates in his image of “the still point of the turning world” (BN 2.16), the stillness without which “There would be no dance” (2.21). To be aware of finitude, for Eliot, is already to have become aware of the infinite, and this is in many ways the project of the *Quartets*; as Wittgenstein writes, “The feeling of the world as a limited whole is the mystical feeling.”⁷⁶ To know oneself as finite, as limited, is already to have intimations about that in relation to which one is so.

The contemplation of nature as embodied in the Book of Ecclesiastes has several themes, set out by Lollar: first, one must come to terms with “the ephemeral nature of worldly reality,” as in Ecclesiastes 1.2 (“vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity”). Second, there is “the devastation of human knowledge,” as in Ecclesiastes 1.18 (“for in wisdom there is much grief; he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow”). Third, there is “the leveling of wise and fool, man and animal,” as in Ecclesiastes 2.15–16 and 3.19 (“Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise?”; “For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts . . . so that a man hath no preeminence over a beast”). Finally, there are the “perplexities of time” as enumerated in Ecclesiastes 3 (as, for example, beyond the more famous litany in verses 1–8, verse 15: “That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been”).⁷⁷ Certainly, time is the

⁷⁴ Lollar, *To See Into the Life of Things*, 37.

⁷⁵ Lollar, 236.

⁷⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (Mineola, N Y: Dover Publications, 1999), 6.45.

⁷⁷ Lollar, “The Final Ecclesiast,” 90–91.

preeminent subject matter of the *Quartets*, though as we shall see Eliot is concerned to contemplate nature in all of these aspects and so come to terms fully with the vanity of worldly reality in its mode of becoming.

The perplexity of time becomes a primary theme of the *Quartets* from the very opening lines, which begin the sequence in dry philosophical speculation:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past. (BN 1.1–3)

Compare the Ecclesiast: “That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been” (Ecclesiastes 3:15); indeed, Eliot’s lines are nearly a paraphrase of this. Compare also Augustine, who writes that “in eternity nothing passes away, but the whole is present—whereas no time is present as a whole.”⁷⁸ No time *as time* is present together with another moment in time; only from a vantage outside of time, in eternity, can the whole be surveyed. All three are concerned to think time in its relation to what is beyond it and sustains it, which is to say eternity, as well as the potential existence of times behind or before the present moment. Behind this perplexity is the very real concern with the possibility of revision, for Eliot must in turn entertain the suggestion that if “All time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable” (BN 1.4–5); that is, there would be no opportunity for doing otherwise than what one has done and will do, ordained from eternity.

The lines of the *Quartets* that most obviously echo the Ecclesiastical contemplation of time, however, are those that open “East Coker”:

In my beginning is my end. In succession
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place
Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.
[...]

⁷⁸ *Confessions*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2019), 11.13–15.18, pp. 209–211.

Houses live and die: there is a time for building
 And a time for living and for generation (EC 1.1–10)

We are reminded of the Biblical lines echoed here, that “To every thing there is a season” (Ecclesiastes 3:1) and that there is “A time to break down, and a time to build up” (3:3); the ultimate insubstantiality of things become visible when seen across a longer duration. Houses, both physical structures and family achievements, are built up and break down, no amount of human effort sufficient to stay their eventual degeneration. What one remembers as a neighborhood may be found, on a later visit, an industrial park or indeed a pile of debris; time moves relentlessly on. But the first line, “In my beginning is my end”—which opens the chiasmus that is finally closed in the very last line of “East Coker”—points back to the ruminations on time in “Burnt Norton,” suggesting that the vantage of eternity is the one from which history will be eventually comprehensible, seen as “a pattern / Of timeless moments” (LG 5.21–22); indeed, the eternal presence of (ae)v eternal presents, as in Augustine’s observation that “the present has no duration.”⁷⁹ Much must be accomplished in the poetry, however, before we can feel, with him, that “time is conquered” (BN 2.43)—we must traverse the meaninglessness (in itself) of earthly existence, must consider the implications of the Annunciation and Incarnation, must in fact glimpse the mystical vision of the unity of fire and rose—but already we know that this poem is deeply concerned with the problem of life in time, of succession and becoming, and of pattern and meaning.

As is the Ecclesiast in verses 2:15–16 and 3:19, Eliot is continually preoccupied in the *Quartets* to tear down the presumptions of human achievement, not only to display the folly of the wise man but to level the hierarchy of man and animal. The principal example of this deflation of the human is the opening section of “East Coker,” itself the lines most saturated with

⁷⁹ 15.20, p. 212.

Ecclesiastical overtones, as seen above. In the process of watching “houses rise and fall” (EC 1.2), Eliot considers the soil itself,

Which is already flesh, fur and faeces,
Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf. (1.7–8)

In death, there is no distinction to be made between the bones of human and animal; all are equally consumed by and enrich the soil, entering back into the cycles of birth and death that characterize phenomenal nature. All the grand achievements of humanity are truly vanity when seen in the light of this finality that awaits us all, when we return to our native earth and lie together with the animals to decompose into identical constituent elements—as the Ecclesiast writes, “All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again” (3:20). So too does Eliot reduce the cycles of our lives to something hardly distinguishable from those of the rest of nature, as in “The time of the coupling of man and woman / And that of beasts.” (EC 2.44–45); seen with a longer view, the dancers (and we ourselves) are only “Keeping time,” (2.39) their “Feet rising and falling,” until they—and the beasts—become, or rather return to, “Dung and death.” (2.45–46)

The ephemerality of nature, however, is a much more important theme in the *Quartets* than has been recognized, as for example in the meditation on the decomposition of the body in BN 4.1–8 (“Time and the bell have buried the day”), or the “hollyhocks that aim too high / Red into grey and tumble down” during the November disturbance of EC 2.1–17, or the rhythm of the river god that keeps “his seasons and rages” in DS 1.1–10. But here I will focus on the most extended and uncompromising of Eliot’s considerations of the decay and insubstantiality of all things that come into being, in the opening lyric of DS 2.1–36. Consider the first stanza of this modified sestina:

Where is there an end of it, the soundless wailing,

The silent withering of autumn flowers
 Dropping their petals and remaining motionless;
 Where is there an end to the drifting wreckage,
 The prayer of the bone on the beach, the unprayable
 Prayer at the calamitous annunciation?

Eliot wonders whether there is an end to the eventual corruption of worldly realities, even and especially those that are most pleasing, such as flowers in autumn. Yet to seek the “end” here is not only to look forward to a time when the soundless wailing will cease, but is also and perhaps more to seek the purpose, the meaning, in the drifting wreckage of life: what is the end toward which all this is tending? For what do we endure it? Certainly, flower petals come to rest on the soil, but they do not thereby find stability, real rest, for they will soon decompose and reenter the cycle of birth and death.

For Eliot, there is “no end, but addition” (DS 2.7): the accumulation of dropped petals, bleached bones, and abandoned hopes will not cease, will only continue accreting to a heap that is itself without meaning—without end.⁸⁰ There are only the “further days and hours” (DS 2.8) during which we attempt to build a life worth having lived—“having to construct something,” as Eliot writes in *Ash-Wednesday*, “Upon which to rejoice” (AW 1.24–25)—attempting to stave off the recognition of death’s finality. We are like the fishermen with their leaky boats, “forever bailing, / Setting and hauling,” while the “North East”—perhaps an image for “our temporal reversion” (DS 5.48)—ever “lowers” (DS 2.25–26) on the horizon. Life, on this pessimistic vision, is merely a waiting during which we attempt to forget that we are waiting, despite nature

⁸⁰ This reveals a potential ambiguity in *Four Quartets* with respect to the infinite: that it is precisely through its “endless” succession that Eliot attempts to demonstrate nature’s finitude seems to border on contradiction. But we should here be reminded of Hegel’s distinction between the “bad” and “true” infinities in his *Science of Logic* (I.1.2.C): taken as a whole, an interminable series of finite terms is nevertheless itself finite. Cf. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George Di Giovanni (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 111.

announcing the inescapability of suffering and death all around us, a truth that would be inescapable did we only take the time to look.

Eliot concludes by reiterating that indeed there is no end to destruction, decay, and dissolution, no inherent purpose inhering within the shifting phenomena that would account for and so redeem their transient existences. The final stanza expresses this poignantly:

There is no end of it, the voiceless wailing,
 No end to the withering of withered flowers,
 To the movement of pain that is painless and motionless,
 To the drift of the sea and the drifting wreckage,
 The bone's prayer to Death its God. Only the hardly, barely prayable
 Prayer of the one Annunciation. (DS 2.31–36)

There is no meaning in the ephemerality of nature, Eliot asserts; all is indeed vanity. But that is not the final word: rather, the final word itself, “Annunciation,” is for Eliot the key to discovering the true end of suffering and death. For, when considered immanently, our “brief transit” (AW 6.5) on the sea of life—the controlling conceit of the lyric, and one with a considerable theological pedigree—is truly “made up of suffering, decay, destruction, and death, and being without a goal, it is meaningless and monotonous.”⁸¹ The early Church Fathers would agree: Evagrius Ponticus, for example, in his commentary on Ecclesiastes, admonishes those who “marvel in contemplation of what has come into being” that they should “not think this is the ultimate end.”⁸² The “end” of the withering of withered flowers is not itself contained in the drift of the sea, “at the level of the natural,”⁸³ but lies beyond it, in what is glimpsed through the backdrop of generation and corruption. This lyric, as Harry Blamires writes, is “concerned to stress the inadequacy of the natural *in itself*,” its “ultimate negativity and meaninglessness,” to

⁸¹ Hargrove, *Landscape as Symbol in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot*, 174.

⁸² J. Robert Wright and Thomas C. Oden, eds., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament IX: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2005), 193.

⁸³ Blamires, *Word Unheard*, 96.

stare unblinkingly at death and discover that it is redeemed only in the continual “intersection of the timeless with time,” a repose typified in the “complete humility and self-surrender” of Mary at the Annunciation.⁸⁴

Later, in “Little Gidding,” Eliot will return to this theme, dwelling further on the destructive qualities of nature. In contrast to “The Dry Salvages,” where nature as generation and corruption is witnessed but not deeply investigated, this lyric dwells on the causes of decay in the ruin of one element by another, suggesting that the instability of the material order could not be otherwise, indeed inhering in the nature of things as their mutual incompatibility—the “battle over places” that for Platonic metaphysics characterizes sensible as opposed to intelligible reality.⁸⁵ Traversing the death of air (LG 2.1–8), of earth (LG 2.9–16), and water and fire (LG 2.17–24), the elements are shown to wreck themselves one upon the other in an (ontologically and temporally) “endless” succession. In the second stanza of the lyric, for example, Eliot considers the conflict between water and earth:

There are flood and drouth
Over the eyes and in the mouth,
Dead water and dead sand
Contending for the upper hand.
The parched eviscerate soil
Gapes at the vanity of toil,
Laughs without mirth.
This is the death of earth.

Earth dies in laughter, perhaps through the irony of surviving a flood only to be destroyed by thirst. But it is not humanity that is at fault—at least this time⁸⁶—rather, nature in itself just is the instability of generation and decay; the elements are “contending for the upper hand” because

⁸⁴ 96–97. Emphasis added.

⁸⁵ Paul Kalligas, “The Structure of Appearances: Plotinus on the Constitution of Sensible Objects,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 61, no. 245 (2011): 767.

⁸⁶ Though see Diaper for the argument that these lines refer to Eliot’s concern about the American Dust Bowl: Jeremy Diaper, *T. S. Eliot and Organicism* (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2018), 69–70.

that is what nature does, because it seeks a stillness and a repose that is not *natural*, at least not while it “groaneth and travaileth” under “Adam’s curse” (Romans 8:22; EC 4.9). As Morris Weitz writes, these stanzas “emphasize the ultimacy of death in the flux, if we regard the flux as ultimate.”⁸⁷ Eliot is enacting nature’s finitude, to help us to see it *as finite*, so that in seeking the reconciliation of the elements we will know to find it not on nature’s sensuous exterior but rather in “the form, the pattern” (BN 5.4) that shines through nature’s depths and constitutes its inner life, its hidden glory. Through a deep consideration of the “turning world,” we come finally to see and experience the dependence of all things on the “still point” (BN 2.16) that keeps them in being.

IV

The tragic realism of this vision of nature is the point of view of the ascetic, who seeks to estrange himself from a world that is “ungovernable” and in “constant flux,” “a world that feeds on itself to its own corruption.”⁸⁸ But this is not the world in its real being, only as it exists in “time’s covenant” (LG 1.14), within “the scheme of generation” (LG 1.18); the contemplative attitude also seeks to clearly perceive the phenomenal world in its insubstantiality, but it does so in order to discriminate between appearance and reality and so attain to a true vision of nature, “the world of beauty and grandeur,”⁸⁹ a truth imperceptible to the unregenerate eye. As Evelyn Underhill phrases it so forcefully, “we see a sham world because we live a sham life”; only the contemplative who has “put off / Sense and notion” (LG 1.42–43), has discarded desire, prejudice, and self-will in passing through the stage of praxis, can with “purified sight” allow the

⁸⁷ “T. S. Eliot,” 51.

⁸⁸ Lollar, *To See Into the Life of Things*, 305.

⁸⁹ Lollar, 305.

world to reassume “the character of Reality, of God.”⁹⁰ This Reality is what lies below the “crust of sin”: having strained a false vision of the natural world through the Ecclesiastical sieve, the contemplative discards what is false and is left only with the true, seeing “in this creation another, higher nature.”⁹¹ As David Bentley Hart expresses the distinction,

the Christian should see two realities at once, one world (as it were) within another: one the world as we all know it, in all its beauty and terror, grandeur and dreariness, delight and anguish; and the other the world in its first and ultimate truth, not simply "nature" but "creation," an endless sea of glory, radiant with the beauty of God in every part, innocent of all violence.⁹²

This is to see with a form of double vision, always “regard[ing] the world as a mirror of infinite beauty, but as glimpsed through the veil of death.”⁹³ For Eliot as for the Christian contemplative generally, “the real or the true is already hidden within the false or lesser reality,”⁹⁴ “the phenomenal pierced in all directions by the real”⁹⁵; the *Quartets* aim to enable the reader to glimpse beneath the crust of sin to the very substance and beauty—the life—of things.

The liberation from desire obtained through ascetical practice and the realization of the insubstantiality of phenomena obtained through the contemplation of nature culminate in this glimpse into the “inner coherence and endurance” of the natural world, creation free from the idolatrous gaze of humanity and “radiant with the beauty of God.”⁹⁶ Having attained a distance from creation through “prayer, observance, discipline, thought, and action” (DS 5.31), we can see nature clearly for what it is, and what it is not, and so relate to it freely in love. As Lollar writes, the one who has attained this stage of the spiritual life “has not been ravished by the

⁹⁰ *Mysticism*, 147.

⁹¹ Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters*, 192.

⁹² David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2005), 60–61.

⁹³ Hart, 61.

⁹⁴ Weitz, “T. S. Eliot,” 53.

⁹⁵ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 89.

⁹⁶ Lollar, *To See Into the Life of Things*, 305; Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 61.

initial beauty of the world; he "runs" through it, we might even say "into" it, to its inner meaning, which is divine reality itself; the true, final necessity of the world's beauty is therefore made manifest."⁹⁷ This "running into" the world is therefore not a movement away from the world, a discarding of it for one somehow above or beyond, but a deepening of our apprehension—and so our love—of this one.⁹⁸ But this sight of the world in its "sacramental fullness" requires that the soul be healed and transformed in the attainment of *apatheia*, a state not of "apathy" but rather of freedom from the "bondage of the senses," allowing one to regard the other in disinterested adoration.⁹⁹ Detachment from earthly things, the purgation prescribed by supposedly world-denying mystics such as John of the Cross, is paradoxically necessary in order that we might return to them with a deepened capacity for engagement and intimacy, indeed opening the possibility for the healing and renewal the world so desperately requires.¹⁰⁰ To hear the "word"—and the Word—speaking in the depths of things, we must, perhaps counterintuitively, cultivate the silence and stillness within which it can speak.¹⁰¹

Christianity takes this idea of the "words" to be perceived in things quite literally; indeed, it is the discernment of the "*logoi*" of things that is the traditional object of the contemplation of nature. Hopkins captures the idea with characteristic brilliance:

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves — goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,

⁹⁷ *To See Into the Life of Things*, 305.

⁹⁸ Foltz, *The Noetics of Nature*, 184.

⁹⁹ Michael Butler, "Perception of the Logoi and Cure of the Soul in St. Maximus the Confessor," *Edification: The Transdisciplinary Journal of Christian Psychology* 6, no. 2 (2012): 114; Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts from the Patristic Era with Commentary*, 2nd ed. (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2013), 213; Underhill, *Mysticism*, 25.

¹⁰⁰ Butler, "Perception of the Logoi and Cure of the Soul in St. Maximus the Confessor," 116; Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind*, 54; Frohlich, "'O Sweet Cautery': John of the Cross and the Healing of the Natural World," 309.

¹⁰¹ Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind*, 187.

Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.*¹⁰²

The *logoi* are the “inner essences of things, the value and significance they have in the eyes of the Creator”¹⁰³—the rational principles and purposes of things—but they are also, as Hopkins shows us, the “sayings” of things, “what the divine *Logos* is saying *to* it within its own depths, and saying *through* it in its interrelation to other beings.”¹⁰⁴ The *logos* of each things finds its source in the *Logos*, in Christ, so that the Incarnation is seen to be not only a historical event but a truly cosmic reality, as Eliot suggests in his omission of the definite article (“The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation,” DS 5.32).¹⁰⁵ Eliot himself gestures often to the “sayings” of things, as for example the “voice of the hidden waterfall” (LG 5.34). In the rose garden, to take a more central example, while being cast out of the garden by the bird, the speaker observes that “the leaves were full of children, / Hidden excitedly, containing laughter” (BN 1.40–41). A straightforward reading of these lines might conclude that there are, on the one hand, leaves, and on the other, within the leaves, children containing their laughter. But if we trace this passage back to its probable source in Dante’s *Paradiso* XXX,¹⁰⁶ we find Beatrice saying to Dante before he drinks from the river of light, “Il fiume e li topazi / ch’entrano ed escono e ’l rider de l’erbe / son di lor vero umbriferi prefazi”; which the Hollanders give as, “The river, the topazes / That enter and leave it, and the laughter of the meadows / Are all shadowy

¹⁰² Gerard Manley Hopkins, “As Kingfishers Catch Fire, Dragonflies Draw Flame;,” in *The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Phillips, Reissued, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5–8.

¹⁰³ David Bradshaw, “The *Logoi* of Beings in Greek Patristic Thought,” in *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Environment, Nature, and Creation*, ed. John Chryssavgis and Bruce V. Foltz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 9.

¹⁰⁴ Foltz, *The Noetics of Nature*, 169.

¹⁰⁵ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 26; Elizabeth Theokritoff, *Living in God’s Creation: Orthodox Perspectives on Ecology* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009), 57; Underhill, *Mysticism*, 87.

¹⁰⁶ The connections between “Burnt Norton” and *Paradiso* XXX are explored with great care in Soud, *Divine Cartographies*, 170–82.

prefaces of their truth.”¹⁰⁷ But as Soud points out, “l rider de l’erbe” is more accurately translated by Allen Mandelbaum as “the grasses’ laughter”¹⁰⁸—though there is also the even more literal “laughter of the grass”—making more striking the parallel with the lines of Eliot, who read Dante in Italian. And if that is so, then the “hidden laughter / Of children in the foliage” (BN 5.35–36) is perhaps also a “shadowy preface” of *its* truth, the deeper purity (the innocence of the child) that within each natural thing remains untouched by the Fall, the beauty of its *logos* “Not known, because not looked for” (LG 5.36)—the goal of natural contemplation.

This elevated spiritual vision comes in the first movement of “Little Gidding,” in the icy brilliance of the winter sun when all of nature seems to be hushed in anticipation:

Midwinter spring is its own season
Sempiternal though sodden towards sundown,
Suspended in time, between pole and tropic. (LG 1.1–3)

With these lines, we have entered a time out of time; the *Quartets* are ostensibly structured around the four seasons of the year, but this final movement opens with a strange new season, not one of the four, a disconcerting and paradoxical no-time that unites winter and spring, death and birth, in a suspension that is somehow both enduring and fading—the contradiction between something’s being “sempiternal” and yet somehow also subject to diurnal motion, losing vivacity as the light fades. Paradoxes multiply as we continue through the passage:

When the short day is brightest, with frost and fire,
The brief sun flames the ice, on pond and ditches,
In windless cold that is the heart’s heat,
Reflecting in a watery mirror
A glare that is blindness in the early afternoon.
And glow more intense than blaze of branch, or brazier,
Stirs the dumb spirit: no wind, but pentecostal fire
In the dark time of the year. (LG 1.4–11)

¹⁰⁷ Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, trans. Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander (New York: Anchor Books, 2008), XXX.76–78.

¹⁰⁸ Soud, *Divine Cartographies*, 179.

Frost appears together with fire, both somehow proceeding from the brightness of the “brief sun” that “flames” the frozen landscape. The exterior chill is an interior warmth, and the light is blindness; nothing is as it should be, as it naturally is. The fire is that of Pentecost, but unlike that earlier descent of the “tongues of fire” recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, there is here no “rushing mighty wind” (2:2–3); all is a fantastic calm. As C. K. Stead observes, the “scene the scene itself is transmuted, the physical world acquiring a strange metaphysical intensity.”¹⁰⁹ Eliot’s environment has become an objective correlative for the *coincidentia oppositorum* that for Nicholas of Cusa annihilates rational conceptions and clears a path for the mind to ascend to God, and for Mircea Eliade constitutes “the mythical pattern” itself.¹¹⁰ Clearly, this is no longer the world of nature as we have come to understand it. We feel time halt, all the earth waiting together with bated breath, our very souls held suspended in equilibrium precisely at their melting point:

Between melting and freezing
The soul’s sap quivers. There is no earth smell
Or smell of living thing. This is the spring time
But not in time’s covenant. (LG 1.12–14)

How strange to resort to the sense of smell at this moment of intense enchantment, when all things seem to bristle with anticipation around us. But it is not at all out of place, for “earth smell” and “smell of living thing” are precisely functions of creatures in their mode of generation and corruption: there is no odor of decomposition as bodies are converted to soil, no enticing perfumes to attract mates and pollinators or less pleasing aromas to deter pests and warn of harmful defenses. There is no death here—it is “the spring time,” the remembrance of mortality

¹⁰⁹ “The Imposed Structure of ‘Four Quartets,’” in *T. S. Eliot: Four Quartets: A Casebook*, ed. Bernard Bergonzi (London: MacMillan and Co., 1969), 209.

¹¹⁰ Nicholas of Cusa, “On Learned Ignorance,” in *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 85–206; Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 419.

passing with the thaw. But there is also no birth—it is “not in time’s covenant,” altogether outside “The agony / Of death and birth.” All things in nature persist in their freshness and verdure with no thought of reproduction because no thought of decay.

Now the hedgerow
Is blanched for an hour with transitory blossom
Of snow, a bloom more sudden
Than that of summer, neither budding nor fading,
Not in the scheme of generation. (LG 1.14–18)

The snow on the branches is a precise positive image for that which Eliot earlier indicated negatively, in the mode of absence (of smell): here is an image of a beauty that is not subject to nature as *phusis*, “a thing’s process of realization, genesis, appearance, or growth.”¹¹¹ The “scheme of generation”—nature in its transience and impermanence, its coming to be and passing away, the “silent withering of autumn flowers”—has no power in the liminal time of midwinter spring. The snow blossoms neither bud nor fade, just as creation in its inner beauty is untouched by sin, not subject to “Adam’s curse”; though it “groaneth and travaileth” in the aftermath of the Fall, it remains whole and entire beneath the crust of sin.

But our vision of the blossoms is also transitory, lasting only an hour: as the speaker, Eliot, and we ourselves continue in the “laver of regeneration” (Titus 3:5), ascending to but not yet reaching the summit of the spiritual life, we are granted only “hints and guesses” (DS 5.29) that give way again to the unregenerate eye, still mesmerized by the sensuous and impermanent surfaces of the natural world. It is not the blossoms that depart—they neither bud nor fade—but we who depart from them, unable to maintain this transfigured vision into the life of things, instead falling back on the passionate and idolatrous gaze that covets the “voluptuary sweetness”

¹¹¹ Pierre Hadot, *The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 7–9.

of “may time” (LG 1.24) and draws nature back with us into the “scheme of generation.”¹¹² Eliot is far from optimistic about our ability to maintain these moments for long, at least those of us who are not saints (DS 5.19)—such a state is for most of us “never here to be realized” (DS 5.44). We wait and hope for the “unimaginable / Zero summer” (LG 1.18–19), where the paradoxes of the midwinter spring are brought to their highest pitch,¹¹³ a vision literally “unimaginable” in its simultaneity of vibrancy and repose. In this state, “Incarnation”—“the impossible union / Of spheres of existence”—now a gift only half understood, will be experienced in its fullness, and “past and future” will have been “conquered, and reconciled” (DS 5.32–36) at last.

The snow blossoms, the “wild thyme unseen,” the “laughter in the garden,” “the voice of the hidden waterfall”—all of these, I suggest, constitute “hints and guesses” of what early theorists of the contemplation of nature understood as the *logoi* of beings, what Maximus the Confessor called “the unspeakable and prodigious fire hidden in the essence of things.”¹¹⁴ These intimations bring us near the summit of the natural contemplation that Eliot has undertaken in the *Quartets*. But whether we make use of this particular theological idiom or not, the reality it designates has been glimpsed by mystics and saints the world over. In the *Yoga-Vashishtha*, for example, we read that “When the universe is seen correctly, it is *Atman* and all bliss, but when it is seen incorrectly, it appears as the world, full of sufferings”; and this heightened perception finds echoes in the “mysterious, transfigured world” of Sufism’s *’alam al-mithâl* (“imaginal

¹¹² Though the logic of the sequence makes fairly clear that it is in fact the snow blossoms melting, rather than our leaving, that occurs at hour’s end, what I am pointing to here is that, while the material support (in the form of the snow) for the vision is no doubt “transitory,” the invisible reality intimated is indeed “always present”—the tree’s flowers in their intelligible being, as intuited in the encounter with the midwinter snow, are truly “neither budding nor fading,” and are always there to be beheld. It is of course the case that the snow melts, but the more salient loss here is of spiritual perception on the part of the speaker, or so I read these lines.

¹¹³ David Perkins, “Rose-Garden to Midwinter Spring: Achieved Faith in the *Four Quartets*,” in *T. S. Eliot: Four Quartets: A Casebook*, ed. Bernard Bergonzi (London: MacMillan and Co., 1969), 258.

¹¹⁴ Cited in Foltz, *The Noetics of Nature*, 147.

world”) or the noumenal *dharmadhatu* of Mahayāna Buddhism.¹¹⁵ Thomas Traherne spoke of little else, writing in his *Centuries* that “The world is a mirror of infinite beauty, yet no man sees it. It is a Temple of Majesty, yet no man regards it. It is a region of Light and Peace, did not men disquiet it. It is the Paradise of God.”¹¹⁶ Evelyn Underhill, whom Eliot knew and studied with great care, is typically lyrical on this topic; she is seemingly inexhaustible on the illumined state of vision that “does not stop at the outer husk of creation [but] penetrates to the divinity which is hidden within,”¹¹⁷ but a representative passage will suffice:

The self then becomes conscious of the living reality of that World of Becoming, the vast arena of the Divine creativity, in which the little individual life is immersed. Alike in howling gale and singing cricket it hears the crying aloud of that “Word which is through all things everlastingly.” It participates, actively and open-eyed, in the mighty journey of the Son towards the Father’s heart: and seeing with purged sight all things and creatures as they are in that transcendent order, detects in them too that striving of Creation to return to its centre which is the secret of the Universe.¹¹⁸

Such an imagination—and Eliot shared it—is truly Edenic.¹¹⁹ It sees, or glimpses, the invisible within the visible, the intelligible within the sensible, a vision in which “paradise and the inhabited world are no longer distinguished.”¹²⁰ It is a central intuition of those who have attained this mode of perception that “Paradise . . . is still in the world, but man is not in Paradise unless he be born again.”¹²¹ Eden is all around us, “Not known, because not looked for” (LG 5.36); it is the soul’s purification, breaking through the crust of sin, that allows it to reenter the Garden.

¹¹⁵ Hari Prasad Shashtri, trans., *The World Within the Mind (Yoga-Vashishtha)* (London: Shanti Sadan, 1937), 137; Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Ṣūfism of Ibn ‘Arabī* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 350–51.

¹¹⁶ Thomas Traherne, *Centuries* (Wilton: Morehouse-Barlow, 1986), 1.31.

¹¹⁷ *Mysticism*, 190.

¹¹⁸ 192.

¹¹⁹ Jewel Spears Brooker, “‘Our First World’: T. S. Eliot and the Edenic Imagination,” *Religion & Literature* 44, no. 1 (2012): 151–59.

¹²⁰ Lollar, *To See Into the Life of Things*, 309.

¹²¹ Jakob Böhme, cited in Underhill, *Mysticism*, 91.

Dante, whom Eliot recognized as his most important influence,¹²² dramatizes the very same insight—the twin regeneration of the soul and its perception of the natural world—in his *Commedia*. The great epic famously begins “Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita,” at which time “mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,” which Eliot alludes to with his “In the middle, not only in the middle of the way / But all the way, in a dark wood, in a bramble” (EC 2.39–40).¹²³ We know from the letter written to Can Grande della Scala that Dante intended his work to be understood “polysemantically,” citing as a model the fourfold exegesis of the medieval Church,¹²⁴ one level of which was the moral or tropological sense that reads a given scriptural text “spiritually” as expressing the journey and travails of the individual soul.¹²⁵ In this way, then, we can understand Dante’s *Commedia* as a dramatization of the spiritual life, the epic’s spiritual geography describing an internal rather than external progress. In the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, Dante comes over the course of some sixty-one cantos to witness the depths of human depravity and confront the sin that binds and blinds him; after ascending the mountain and purging his soul of its vices, Dante enters finally into the “refining fire” (LG 2.92) in *Purgatorio* XXVII without which no soul can pass into Paradise. Purified of corrupting passion, the scales fall from his eyes and he finds himself no longer in a “selva oscura” but rather in a “divina foresta,” the Earthly Paradise.¹²⁶ Virgil connects this transfigured vision explicitly with Dante’s effort of self-purification:

You are free of the steep way, free of the narrow.
‘Look at the sun shining before you,

¹²² “Talk on Dante [What Dante Means to Me],” *Prose* 7.482.

¹²³ “Midway in the journey of our life / I came to myself in a dark wood.” Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander (New York: Anchor Books, 2002), I.1–2.

¹²⁴ “Dante to Cangrande: English,” §7, accessed March 12, 2020, <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/cangrande.english.html>.

¹²⁵ Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: Volume 2: The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. E. M. Macierowski (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 127–34.

¹²⁶ Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, trans. Jean Hollander and Robert Hollander (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), XVIII.2.

look at the fresh grasses, flowers, and trees
 which here the earth produces of itself.
 [...]

 Your will is free, upright, and sound.
 Not to act as it chooses is unworthy:
 over yourself I crown and miter you.¹²⁷

The journey of the soul described in the *Commedia* is in no small part about the corruption of perception by the passions and its healing through ascetical practice; Dante's passage from "dark" to "sacred" wood is a movement not of the feet but of the heart, a removal of the crust of sin in order to see again "the Paradise of God" that was always before him. Eliot, who titled his first collection of critical essays *The Sacred Wood* and could hardly have failed to imbibe this lesson from his master, charts much the same course in his final poetic magnum opus.

Four Quartets begins in statement, but it ends in vision,¹²⁸ a vision that brings to completion the movement of the spiritual life described above: achieving *apatheia* with the "shirt of fire" and "internal darkness," Eliot's poetic speaker passes through the stage of *praxis* and Proverbs; obtaining an understanding of the metaphysical transparency of phenomena, he passes through the stage of *theoria physike* and Ecclesiastes; and in the final lines of "Little Gidding," he sees with Dante an image of all things in their unity—"When the tongues of flame are in-
 folded / Into the crowned knot of fire / And the fire and the rose are one" (LG 5.44–46)—and so glimpses the unitive state of *theologia* with the Song of Songs. In this essay, I have explored Eliot's *Four Quartets* as a poetic expression of Blake's dictum that "If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is—infinite," and though much ground has been covered both theologically and poetically, this statement fully encapsulates the dynamic that I see operative in Eliot's late masterpiece. Environmental philosophy, as I elaborated above,

¹²⁷ XXVII.132-142.

¹²⁸ R. L. Brett, "Mysticism and Incarnation in *Four Quartets*," *English: Journal of the English Association* 16, no. 93 (1966): 99.

is in need of what Bruce Foltz calls an “aesthetic of the holy in nature—that phenomenological depth or integrity or eternity or transcendence that is always grasped, however tacitly or adequately, within the beauty of nature, and that constitutes the living heart of that beauty itself.”¹²⁹ Such, I argue, is a prerequisite to a renewed and healing relationship to the earth. But it is not enough to speak of this transcendent beauty in nature as a neutral datum, for it is something that must be sought, discerned, and sacrificed for; it requires something of us to see, and having seen, requires more again to preserve and share it. Such is the ecocritical import, I believe, of T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, and though the message itself is not *à la mode*, it is for that very reason timeless—and true.

¹²⁹ *The Noetics of Nature*, 30.

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