

T. S. Eliot, *New English Weekly*, and the Audience of *Four Quartets*

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Before they were consolidated as *Four Quartets* (1944), “Burnt Norton,” “East Coker,” “The Dry Salvages,” and “Little Gidding” appeared individually in a little magazine called *New English Weekly*, which Eliot’s friend John Hayward called “the obscure little journal Tom is interested in” (qtd. in Gardner 17).¹ This journal had started as a vehicle for monetary reform, but lately it had been trending toward debates about reinvigorating the Anglican Church and the overall fervor of Christian believers. At the time of the quartets’s publication during World War II, the two editorial directions were still locked in uneasy tension. Why Eliot should have chosen this venue for his late-career masterpiece may not be transparently obvious, since more popular magazines would

¹As Denis Donoghue emphasizes, the quartets may not at first have been conceived as a group of four: “Burnt Norton” had appeared at the end of Eliot’s *Collected Poems, 1909–35* (1936) and may have seemed like a capstone to his career. In any event, the poems did not appear in *New English Weekly* in the order one finds them in *Four Quartets*. “East Coker” came out first in 1940, and then “Burnt Norton” was republished later that year, followed by “The Dry Salvages” in 1941 and “Little Gidding” a year later.

surely have welcomed these poems and reached a larger reading audience. Furthermore, his motives for placing religious poetry within a quasi-religious periodical should not be misunderstood as “preaching to the choir,” since there were more theologically consistent (and coherent) journals he might have chosen instead.

The ethics of applying literature to the task of conversion had vexed Eliot since his own, very public, confession of faith in 1928. He proves even more pessimistic about the *efficacy* of literary persuasion. In his fascinatingly despondent essay “Religion and Literature,” he voices doubts that any morally upright literature can long sustain its effects upon a reader, since contemporary readers read, unaware of their susceptibility. Cavalier readers will simply unconsciously replace one loosely held belief with another when the next novel or poem is read, fueling Eliot’s anxieties that virtuous works of literature have only transient effects. If the overwhelming weight of modern printed matter works against belief and in favor of cynical liberalism, religious literature would have to be very striking indeed to have any efficacy at all.

Unfortunately, Eliot believed most of it was badly written. Ever willing to set himself as the judge of literary quality, Eliot casually laments its paucity in contemporary religious literature. He explains its shortcomings by blaming the degenerate culture that it aims to prod toward righteousness. Even the work of G. K. Chesterton, whom he admires, cannot persuade its readership as effectively as the poets of Eliot’s cherished metaphysical period, whose sporadic libertinism was tempered by a social expectation of religious commitment. In contrast, Chesterton’s writing suffers, Eliot believes, because it must impose a moral condition upon a representation of “a world which is definitely not Christian” (“Religion” 100), and although the disparity is of course instructive, it feels forced. The religious author, he insists, must attempt the impossible task of converting a readership whose faith has waned from a communally shared set of beliefs in favor of an increasingly cynical relativism:

when the common code is detached from its theological background, and is consequently more and more merely a matter of

habit, it is exposed both to prejudice and to change. At such times morals are open to being altered by literature; so that we find in practice that what is “objectionable” in literature is merely what the present generation is not used to. It is a commonplace that what shocks one generation is accepted quite calmly by the next. (97)

By complaining that what he wishes “is a literature which should be unconsciously, rather than deliberately and defiantly, Christian” (100), Eliot seems to be advocating for some sort of moral shame-facedness, automatic squeamishness, or bodily uneasiness: something felt rather than thought, because of long habituation. Since the preconditions for such unconscious religious belief are systemic rather than individualistic, Eliot fears that neither he nor Chesterton stands much chance in the face of such a pessimistic role for religious literary rhetoric.

But it may be altogether too easy to dismiss the original provenance of *Four Quartets* as Eliot’s attempt to turn away from the disappointments of liberalism and speak only to the Anglican faithful. The initial publication of the poems in *New English Weekly* was part of a concerted effort to brand a devotional poetics that aims for a popular audience without succumbing to popular art’s forced, and therefore false, consciousness. By doing so, Eliot advocated a turgidly difficult meeting of crisis and belief that takes place entirely within the individual—a spiritual awakening that *New English Weekly*’s audience would be predisposed to recognize, understand, and admire. That secular capitalism and Liberal politics offered no coherent hope for English culture is part of *Four Quartets*’s theological premise, but the sequence’s religious rhetoric operates through an appropriation of the journal’s mission of faith. Such belief was once and might still have been true throughout England, and war-weary readers might find its subjunctive demonstration especially attractive during the London Blitz and its aftermath. This strategy represented an opportunity literature is not often afforded to change hearts and minds.

The transition Eliot bemoans in “Religion and Literature,” when the “common code” of worship becomes empty habit rather than

real belief, was not guaranteed to flow inexorably toward decay. He merely proposes that the modern reading public had become particularly susceptible to suggestion. By the logic Eliot advances, the same cultural forces that quickened the decline of shared belief now simultaneously leave the English vulnerable to having their newly acquired liberalism shaken and supplanted in favor of something more coherently righteous. Eliot's own conversion had proven solitary, difficult, and intensely cerebral. Any religious proselytization Eliot was party to would need to reject the slick parlor tricks of charlatans and demagogues that he adamantly decried in his political adversaries—otherwise, his religious intent might be mistaken for forced conversion as well as *feeling* forced, like Chesterton's overcompensations. His desire for an "unconscious," holistic suasion was an attempt to allow for a religious experience analogous to the one he had himself undergone. *Four Quartets* lays the groundwork for such a conversion but leaves the actual miracle suspended ephemerally and precariously in air, just as occurs when the rarified lotus flower rises from Burnt Norton's garden in the first section of "Burnt Norton," only to disappear a moment later.

Furthermore, *New English Weekly* was directed at an audience that combined intellectual discourse (literary, cultural, political, and economic) with an easy assumption of Christian belief. Placing his poems in this journal meant allowing the paratextual frame of their first appearance to be consonant with his recent religious arguments in *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939) and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), the former of which was reviewed in the journal, which also published versions of the first three chapters of the latter in 1943. By publishing in *New English Weekly*, Eliot could reasonably anticipate that his wartime readers would encounter his poems within the frame of unconsciously shared belief that the journal modeled, and which might thereby condition their reception.

Four Quartets is thus able to offer a type of extremely subtle religious persuasion wherein the pressures of enduring the war and questioning which values exactly were being defended by British soldiers are met with the unexpected pleasures brought by acceding to divine providence. At the very least, readers eventually experience a welcome

relief from the anxieties the sequence houses, which is analogous to the end of uncertainty that occurs along with one's surrender of ultimate control of, and responsibility for, events. In a very real sense Eliot spoke from within, and first and foremost to, the "Community of Christians" he describes in the *Idea of a Christian Society* when he chose to launch these poems in that journal (28). Others only overhear that conversation. If by eavesdropping one voluntarily decides to substitute a faith-directed perspective for liberal relativism, the poems would have sponsored that outcome without appearing to force the issue.

When Eliot began composing his "patriotic" wartime quartets, he manipulated their appearance to ensure that they would be read in light of his prose responses to political fanaticism.² Whereas "Burnt Norton" had first been published without fanfare at the end of *Collected Poems, 1909–1935*, in April 1936, each of the wartime quartets was a *cause célèbre*, heavily publicized by *New English Weekly*. After "East Coker" caused the Easter 1940 number to sell out (as did the pamphlet version of the poem the journal subsequently issued), the number including the "The Dry Salvages" was advertised in the two issues preceding its appearance on February 27, 1941, and readers were asked to order their issues beforehand because of wartime paper shortages. After Eliot ceased publication of *Criterion* in 1939, he began writing periodic commentaries in *New English Weekly* with the same dry title ("A Commentary") and wry editorial voice, shuttling his literary readers over to a journal begun by A. R. Orage as a Social Credit organ espousing monetary reform through a National Dividend. All of these occurred in the same journal that saw the bulk of Eliot's correspondence clarifying, quibbling over, and defending *After Strange Gods* (1934) and especially *The Idea of a Christian Society*.

²As Sebastian Knowles notes, Peter Ackroyd's biography of Eliot unearthed a draft copy of Eliot's essay *The Three Voices of Poetry* (1945) in which he strikes out a descriptor of the three wartime quartets as "patriotic" (Ackroyd 264; Knowles 102).

Publishing the wartime quartets in *New English Weekly* afforded Eliot unique opportunities to shape the emerging persona of *Four Quartets*. First of all, since Eliot had consistently referred his readers in each journal to his separate activities in the other, the authoritative, critical voice commanding *Criterion* could continue commenting in *New English Weekly* with little interruption even after *Criterion* was defunct. He could thus sustain a relationship with readers he had already primed to embrace difficulty as a means of staving off the demands of ideological partisanship by revealing their zealotry as vast oversimplifications inadequate to address the complexities of the 1930s. Eliot's frequent editorial sallies reminding readers of his Christian prose suggest that the journal's regular readership might reasonably think first of the quartets as coming from the author of *The Idea of a Christian Society* rather than *The Waste Land* (1922).³

Moreover, the eclectic preoccupations of the journal allowed the quartets's publication to link them to its complex web of *engagé* activities. When Orage returned from his long American pilgrimage in service to the cult of the mystic guru G. I. Gurdjieff, he started *New English Weekly* on the model of his previous project *New Age* as an instrument to explain, organize, and implement Social Credit in England. Upon Orage's death in 1934, Philip Mairet took over as editor, modifying the journal's original goals to include his concept of "Christian Sociology." A member of the Chandos Group, Mairet signed on the former guild socialist Maurice Reckitt (who reviewed *The Idea of a Christian Society* for the journal) as a regular contributor, and the instability caused by this confluence of active theories made for a fascinatingly incoherent confabulation of fervencies. Although he had been a frequent and prominent contributor during

³In a review of Eliot's *Later Poems* (1941), dated September 25, 1941, for example, R. A. Hodgson singles out "Choruses from 'The Rock'" for equal billing with *The Waste Land* (221). Whether this valuation results from the enthusiastic treatment of a national dividend in "The Rock," its Christian devotional choruses, or simply a profound misreading on the part of the reviewer is unclear.

Orage's editorial direction, Ezra Pound's anti-usury slurs and laments over the journal's new religious focus found themselves shunted more and more to the correspondence section, while Eliot's contributions found a serious audience of periodical interlocutors, among them Reckitt and V. A. Demant, author of *The Religious Prospect* (1939) and editor of *The Faith That Illuminates* (1935), in which Eliot published "Religion and Literature." All of these figures were as likely to counsel more expansive and ambitious thinking as to advise reigning it in.

Eliot's frequent presence, the journal's serious openness to engage diverse ideologies, and its sustained commitment to radical intervention in economic and social systems also began to attract a much different audience. Louis MacNeice and George Orwell both contributed to *New English Weekly* during the years of the three wartime quartets, and Eliot in his commentaries reached out to Stephen Spender and Cyril Connolly via their nascent journal *Horizon* ("On" 251), now not as a rival editor but as a fellow supporter of small journals, commiserating about the difficulty of keeping them afloat. He also praised some aspects of Ronald Duncan's *Townsmen*, about which he opined that its remarkable affinities with *New English Weekly* ought to outweigh the extremities to which the new journal's editor seemed intent on taking it:

I feel like a Tory who becomes aware that he is also (having been born when he was, and not several generations earlier) something of a Liberal; or a *requete* who has strayed in to a meeting of phalangists, or a Frenchman attached to the *ancien régime*, who, having come to accept the Marseillaise as the national anthem, might find himself gaoled for singing it. ("Commentary" 75)

Eliot's ruefulness derives from Duncan's similar religious and economic interests and also the obvious "influence" of Ezra Pound over the impressionable contributors of the *Townsmen*, an influence Eliot himself had personally once felt. Here, he counsels them that Pound's hobbyhorses could be beneficial as long as their sway "does

not become a possession" (75). These olive branches to the Auden Generation and to Pound's acolytes represent not so much an attempt to expand his readership but to seize control of the context by which such readers could access his new poems. Interposed between the rising successors of *Criterion*, Eliot's chosen forum could assume an *engagé* pose while maintaining its characteristic cautious thoughtfulness, and though *New English Weekly* had sacrificed the single-minded editorial discipline of Orage's tenure, the quartets as read within that journal would still seem a coherent island in the midst of a composite ocean of competing explanatory systems.

In sum, *New English Weekly* allowed Eliot opportunities to qualify his earlier authorial personae and to continue from "Burnt Norton" to "Little Gidding" newly equipped to speak authoritatively on Anglicanism and English society. It also afforded him the chance to translate his prose interests in ethics, difficulty, and abstraction into his poetry as if those interests had always been consistent fundamentals of his social thought rather than belated reactions to specific cultural pressures. The autobiographical efforts of the three quartets that first appeared in the journal depict how Eliot had come to occupy his current position in English letters from the departure of his ancestor Andrew Elyot from the historical hamlet of East Coker in Somerset in 1669 (Gardner 42) to the distinguished tenure of his family within Massachusetts Bay and St. Louis environs, described in "The Dry Salvages," to Eliot's eventual return to England, commitment to its national church, and wartime defense as an air raid warden, as depicted in "Little Gidding." The unasked question the wartime quartets answer concerns Eliot's *physical* presence in London, not his intellectual position. They establish his credentials as an ancestrally Christian defender of England rather than as a newly converted Tory or as an American arriviste. The speaking persona is always conservative and post-conversional.

The implicit consistency of his *New English Weekly* persona allowed Eliot to produce within the structural and thematic difficulty of *Four Quartets* the poetic counterpart of the double-mindedness, cautious abstraction, and priority of Christian ethics over politics that he advocated in his cultural prose. The *Criterion* commentaries

had merely reacted to recently published books and historical events that seemed in the moment to require his studious inveighing. As a consequence, they gradually took on a haphazard and accretionary politics (if indeed those commentaries can be said to have a politics at all). But Eliot's reduced role in *New English Weekly* allowed him to repackage the asperity and authority of his *Criterion* persona's aesthetic pronouncements with the new benefit of Christian humility, the ascription to which the later journal's readers would be much more receptive.

Readers of each quartet must balance two difficult situations in their minds at once. "Burnt Norton" tasks its addressee with contemplation of the "world of speculation" that might have been and continues to color that which has been (217), to exist in between the garden of lotus flowers and the London tube, thinking of both. "East Coker" balances the time past of Eliot's ancestry with the time present of his return to England, overlaying the two to legitimate the familial tradition and melancholy flavor behind the voice's claim to loss. In "The Dry Salvages" Eliot conjures the animist deities peopling the Mississippi and the dangerous rocks off Cape Ann, Massachusetts, coupling these with a geographically distant England, to which, along with its established church, Eliot has sworn allegiance. "Little Gidding" compares the martyred Christian Society of Nicholas Ferrar's experimental seventeenth-century commune with the beleaguered populace of London during the Battle of Britain. Above and beyond the cognitive expense of these parallels, readers are then expected to seek the four instruments of the persona, the four elements (earth, wind, water, and air), and the four seasons in a remarkably dexterous interweaving that eventually belabored Eliot's composition of "Little Gidding" but gives the finished sequence of four poems an aura of completeness, totality, and coherence.

Four Quartets's initial provenance in *New English Weekly* thus enacts a Janus-faced, doubled outreach through an accretionary persona. The poem creates an abstract version of the Christian Society to the sympathetic audience aware of Eliot and his public cultural activities even as it engages with the equally active young intellectual "men of letters" Eliot had earlier identified with fanatical simplifiers

in his *Criterion* commentaries. John Xiros Cooper identifies this latter group as the “mandarinate” (31), the group of committed, *engagé* thinkers who had rejected the status quo, amelioration, and gradualism in the early thirties but had increasingly begun to question their earlier fervencies after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (August 23, 1939) muddied the ideological waters.⁴ To satisfy the mandarinate’s rigorous requirements, the poem would need to establish itself in league with potentially radical commitment toward the betterment of systemic inequities. It would also increasingly be expected to provide directions for how the intellectual might reconcile qualms about liberal democracy in order to function independently and competently within the nation-state at war. Finally, it would need to strike the right note of muted righteousness and elevated purveyance over the political situation—to indicate its poet’s savviness about the rigors of ideology without turning off its readers by reiterating old grievances.

While Cooper’s history of the reception of the poem is utterly convincing in its account of *Four Quartets*’s rapid canonization within literary modernism, the conclusion it shares with Lucy McDiarmid’s *Saving Civilization* (1984)—that the poem succeeds in

“Cooper defines the “mandarinate” as “the smaller but still rather sizable cadre of intellectuals, academics, artists, the more culturally attentive Oxbridgians from the professions, the civil service and journalism who had come to [Eliot’s] work in the late 1920s and 1930s, the readers who had puzzled over the Ariel poems and *Ash Wednesday*, purchased the *Selected Essays* in 1932, and wondered about Eliot’s politics and loyalties in the years of historical turmoil and war. . . . It was this smaller group of readers in England and America, and increasingly in Europe as well, who found in *Four Quartets* both a psychological refuge and the outlines of a new kind of subjectivity better suited to the new world order, and the situation of power politics, at the end of the German war. One could still make out these readers, even with an expanded readership, because Eliot never stopped speaking specifically to them. He may have dealt with general ideas and concepts in art, politics, and culture, but how he framed those ideas, the effectiveness of the rhetoric of their presentation owed as much, if not more, to his sense of the audience he wanted to address, and to the historical situation of that audience, as it did to the caliber of his temperament or to the icy ferocity of his private struggles” (31).

reaching this mandarinat by abjuring any real-world efficacy—is less persuasive. As Cooper and McDiarmid read it, the poem strategically prepares a safely sequestered and ontologically distinct space for its readers, a parallel realm of thought-experiment and inconsequentiality, into which author and audience can wait out the military struggle engulfing Europe that was so physically and mentally overwhelming. McDiarmid explains Eliot’s sequestration of the art-object as a substitution of the performative for the constative functions of the speech-act, prompted by the too close resemblance of the poet’s voice to the propagandizing orator’s (93). Cooper, on the other hand, stipulates Eliot’s desire to convert his readers to Christianity but judges the theological mission of the sequence a failure because of the strategy by which it appeals to its readers. To attract the mandarinat, Eliot models an “aesthetic consciousness” possessing the humility to “step back from itself, simply and unpretentiously, and assert the need to recognize the limits of [aesthetic] power and, finally, to renounce it” (135–36).

These readings proceed from the assumption that the coherence of Eliot’s religious vision depends upon a rhetoric of renunciation and evacuation of any and all vestiges of earthly power as a prerequisite for the issuance of its utterances. Indeed, since the abstraction of its hypothetical speculations tends to evoke the subjunctive mood rather than the more politically viable imperative, one may readily mistake a subtle but insistent discrimination between similar alternatives for irresolution or a refusal to act. But Cooper and McDiarmid’s readings suggest that Eliot laboriously constructed his elaborate *New English Weekly* persona primarily to efface the political purpose of his social writings. A more viable reading intimates instead that Eliot engages frequently with this periodical to clear up his record’s inconsistencies and retrospectively provide a coherent paratextual persona for the quartets.

Eliot’s insistence on the priority of ethics in public policy as well as his defensive manipulation of difficulty as a trope to ward off ideological commitment consistently shores up his haphazard prewar prose of the 1930s. But his use of abstraction progresses from an early attempt to inoculate his social theories from the unethical consequences that

would attend their actual implementation to a purposeful religious mystification in his later wartime writings. The leap of faith Eliot requires from his readers in order to imagine the Christian Society is not so much an obscurantist move as a signal that he is unwilling to divorce religious mystery from the practice of pragmatic politics.

The almost completely unchanged republication of “Burnt Norton,” both separately in *New English Weekly* and then in the 1944 pamphlet collection of *Four Quartets*, is Eliot’s attempt to make a virtue of his contradictions. As Michael North shows, this is the same tactic Eliot had applied earlier in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” by first developing cultural tradition and particular talent as antimonies before brazenly declaring them an identity (North 89). In the case of the quartets, merely by repackaging the first quartet alongside three very different poems that develop similar themes but correct, modify, and act on them rather than leave them suspended in deliberate stasis, Eliot could implicitly claim that the change in his political emphasis had not been a change at all.

A close reading of the first quartet and an examination of how “East Coker” and the second iteration of “Burnt Norton” correct possible early misreadings of Eliot’s persona demonstrate this idea. The first “Burnt Norton” arose out of a draft of *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), one in a series of plays that developed Eliot’s post-conversion concentrations on communal religious experience. The play’s producer, Martin Browne, had requested reactions from the priests and the chorus of Canterbury women surrounding Thomas à Becket as the tempters tempt the future saint in order to alleviate the “static” nature of the dialogue (Gardner 15–16). The first thirteen lines of “Burnt Norton” at one time belonged to the second priest, responding to the second tempter’s reminder to Thomas that he was once “[t]he master of policy / Whom all acknowledged,” and that he should attempt to regain “[t]he Chancellorship that you resigned / When you were made Archbishop” (*Murder* 185). This effectual trade of “[h]oliness hereafter” for the “power [that] is present” (186) suggests, as Helen Gardner notes, that the rose garden “at the end of the passage which we did not take” is a temptation to reinhabit the moment before choosing, when one closes down a possibly more

personally beneficial outcome with no way of knowing which path would have been more beneficial (39). Although Becket shrugs off this highly specific seduction, the passage's origins in a speech by a witness rather than the target of temptation mark the formative kernel of "Burnt Norton" with the play's abstract and self-consciously bracketed interests in the political, the persuasive, and the communal.

When Eliot transposes the rose garden, representing what might have been, into "Burnt Norton," the seductiveness of the improbable becomes the seductiveness of the art object radically sundered from the real. Its aesthetic attractiveness derives from its inutility, its beauty from its fragile preciousness. The roses of the garden "[h]ad the look of flowers that are looked at" ("Burnt" 218), and the garden itself houses myriad "unseen eye-beam[s]," set to beautiful effect by the tune of "unheard music" that distances them into self-conscious metarepresentation (218). As to what those flowers could accomplish, at best they might disturb "the dust on a bowl of rose leaves" (218), given enough time; by 1944, "Little Gidding" excoriates the inefficacy of the roses by intoning "Ash on an old man's sleeve / Is all the ash the burnt roses leave" (214). The temporal suspension of the lyric moment, the permanent preservation of an individual sensoria and its attendant fascinations, and the untrammelled prelapsarian purity of the "first world" recommend themselves to readers on behalf of all that is delicate, fleeting, and vulnerable ("Burnt" 218). The lotus flower rises quietly out of the garden pool before it and the birds whose song conjured it vanish with the passing of a cloud, but the poem captures it within its instant of pluripotent multiple trajectories, when all is possible and no attractive options have yet been foreclosed.

But it is always an open question in the first version of "Burnt Norton" whether one ought to follow "the deception of the thrush" into the garden (218), since it entails renouncing earthly obligations and responsibilities in order to do so. In 1935, even before the Abyssinian Crisis, the Spanish Civil War, and the looming specter of World War II, a grim social landscape prompted poetry that either embraced an ideologically committed aesthetic or eschewed such commitment altogether. Such ideological bifurcation ostensibly

amounted to a choice between the polarized field of Left or Right aesthetic political loyalty, but for Eliot this was a false choice. He believed in a third option that rejected the comforts of speaking for a party (strength in numbers), and speaking only for his fraught and self-consciously limited perspective (lonely idiosyncrasy).

In “Burnt Norton” this choice translates to one between “garlic” and “sapphires,” the practical but pungent on the one hand, the decorous but inutile on the other. Both have dubious effects when they find themselves enmeshed in the “mud” of cultural politics:

Garlic and sapphires in the mud
 Clot the bedded axle-tree.
 The trilling wire in the blood
 Sings below inveterate scars
 And reconciles forgotten wars.
 The dance along the artery
 The circulation of the lymph
 Are figured in the drift of stars. (218)

Since one expects to find neither garlic nor sapphires in the mud, they stay undisturbed where they have been thrown; there, both do no more than further obstruct the motion of the cultural “axle-tree.” “Garlic and sapphires in the mud” is a direct, if altered, allusion to the “[t]onnerre et rubis aux moyeux” of Mallarmé’s “*M’introire dans ton histoire*,” itself an echo of Baudelaire and the Symbolistes, whose English counterparts were the aesthetes propounding the *ars gratis artis* autonomy of the written artifact (Gardner 81). Since the poem has already intoned that “human kind / cannot bear much reality” (“Burnt” 218), another line borrowed from *Murder in the Cathedral*, the temptation in this lyric is to concentrate more on the “drift of stars” and ascend above the furious political tempest to the formal aesthetic sphere. There, from the safely serene vantage of “light upon a figured leaf,” one “hear[s] upon the sodden floor / Below, the boarhound and the boar / Pursue their pattern as before / But reconciled among the stars” (“Burnt” 219). From an aestheticized remove, the now trivialized machinations of polarized politics

seem less threatening, for one begins to see them from the heights of a formal “pattern” and therefore expect no better.

When this tetrameter lyric ends by assuring that such a pattern is “reconciled among the stars” (219), “Burnt Norton” reveals the pattern as a self-satisfied and ineffective tautology even as it resembles the earlier appearance of “reconciles” ten lines earlier, which proves to be quite a different temptation for the poet. If poetry could heal the “inveterate scars” of the war-ravaged European reader, that might be a definite good, no matter how muddy the poem would have to get in the process. Since even the problematic garlic and sapphires found their effect as a physiological “clot,” poetry can lay some claim to “the trilling wire in the blood” that can tunnel below those inveterate scars, if the poet could find some way of effectively reaching and reconciling readers to the cultural tensions unconsciously at work below the surface of society.

The problem with this approach is that “[t]he dance along the artery / The circulation of the lymph” that the rhythms of poetry may stimulate are dangerously close to those rhetorical techniques of the political orator, who not only inhabits culture but attempts to propel it somewhere. Immediately after this brief lyric, Eliot quotes from his earlier *Coriolan* poems (“Triumphal March”), an unfinished sequence that was meant to consider the political temperament self-positioned “[a]t the still point of the turning world” and its effect on those it commands (“Burnt” 219). When the world has just been described as an “axle-tree,” to be at the still center of culture is to be at the axis, not seeming to move (“Do not call it fixity” [219]), but in actuality having become that which causes the revolution.

The second version of “Burnt Norton” appeared with the first collected bundling of all four quartets in 1944 and, as Peter Middleton argues, attempts an “unwriting” of the first poem by replicating its form and suggesting a sequence of poetic sequences harmonizing into a fourfold thematic unity (88). The only textual change is Eliot’s substitution of “[a]ppeasing long forgotten wars” for “[a]nd reconciles forgotten wars,” but that potent substitution forecloses the possibility that the poem advocates cultural renunciation when considered alongside Eliot’s Christian prose paratexts. In 1944, long after

Mussolini's declaration of a Rome-Berlin Axis on October 25, 1936, any use of "axis" or its derivatives would carry a much more ominous connotation, as would "appease" after the Munich Conference in 1938 to any reader conscious of Eliot's despairing denunciation of Chamberlain's appeasement of Hitler in *The Idea of a Christian Society* (51) and his frequent essays at Liberalism in *Criterion* and *New English Weekly*. If the first "Burnt Norton" shrank away from any resemblance to the manipulative speech of the politician because of the unethical actions it might impel, after Munich the "trilling wire in the blood" had also been proven to lead to insufferable unwillingness to act against Nazi aggression. Clearly, the question has shifted from whether to engage to which form of engagement the poem will advocate. The second "Burnt Norton" conjures its rose garden and lotus flower to help readers consider how to salvage that "twittering world" of "the gloomy hills of London, / Hampstead and Clerkenwell, Campden and Putney, / Highgate, Primrose and Ludgate" (220), to seek succor within the Tube, not to take refuge *from* it.

"East Coker," too, corrects some of the more enigmatic elements of the first quartet's proximity to real events by drastically emending the separation readers may have intuited between poem and world. In its second section, having already established its seasonal motif of midsummer, "East Coker" supplies a tetrameter lyric structurally analogous to the "garlic and sapphires" of "Burnt Norton" that transforms Eliot's early assessment of ideological poetry into the naïve "disturbance of the spring" ("East" 326). When the "[l]ate roses" of the first quartet are filled with the "early snow" of the 1940 Sitzkrieg, the wartime atmosphere lends Eliot a belated opportunity to scrutinize his prewar complacency (326):

Thunder rolled by the rolling stars
 Simulates triumphal cars
 Deployed in constellated wars
 Scorpion fights against the Sun
 Until the Sun and Moon go down
 Comets weep and Leonids fly. (326)

The sapphires have disappeared, and the dismissive adjustment Eliot made when alluding to Mallarmé's sonnet in "Burnt Norton" has collapsed from contemptible garlic back into terrifying thunder. The stars, which had earlier been content to "drift" by peaceably and obliviously, now find themselves "deployed" in a martial simulation of the war below rather than its tidier astrological reconciliation. There is now no peace to be found in a poem that purposively disconnects itself from the war, no distancing aesthetic pattern to be mapped on events that will not be read by wartime readers as a mimetic flurry of fighting, weeping, and flying. Better to embrace the wartime context and find a fit role for a poetics of exigency.

Immediately after these lines, "East Coker" dismisses the spring-time of "Burnt Norton" (and its own parody of those lines) as merely "a way of putting it—not very satisfactory: / A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion / Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings" (327). This poem is intent on abasing its predecessor's valorization of form as a good in itself, its taste for the seductiveness of the sequestered aesthetic that obviates intellectual engagement in real events. But even as "East Coker" betrays its need to diagnose the potential escapism of the first quartet, it also links its self-excoriations to the ironic temperament that is satisfied merely to prefer the "long looked forward to, / Long hoped for calm, the autumnal serenity / And the wisdom of age" to the messy but more responsible "intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings" that could conceivably lead one to follow a train of thought to its logical conclusion and thereby necessitate ethical, political, and indeed sometimes military action (327). Eliot walks a fine line in revising his first poem, since the temptation to unsay or undo a past choice also led to the precious and ephemeral investigations of "Burnt Norton" and colored Eliot's despairing rejection of the Munich Pact. In effect, mental inhabitation of the abstract simulates the wishful thinking of the "quiet-voiced elders" of the Chamberlain cabinet ("East" 327), whose "peace in our time" mantra turned out to have bought only a slight reprieve for England—or as "East Coker" puts it, the "serenity [that was] only a deliberate hebetude, / The wisdom only the knowledge of dead secrets / Useless in the

darkness into which they peered / Or from which they turned their eyes" (327). Political events, Eliot argues, are simulated within poetry even as they are ignored, and the poet can only realize his complicity after the fact, once the "knowledge derived from experience" exposes the "receipt for deceit" the politicians have made (327). The ambiguity of this line refers both to a recipe for future denial and misdirection (in the British usage of "receipt") and a record of a past transaction that cannot now be undone (Gardner 101).

But the wartime quartets did much more than simply warn against future deceit, and Eliot's contemporaries who were his avid readers would also have been aware of his personal version of ethical action during war. As Gardner summarizes, during the composition of the quartets Eliot involved himself in what John Hayward described as "unending social engagements" that he feared would detract from his poetic output (qtd. in Gardner 20):

Early in the war Eliot joined J. H. Oldham in editing the *Christian News-Letter* and as 'joint-editor' wrote many whole numbers. He was also involved in Archbishop Temple's Malvern Conference in January 1941. In addition to these specifically Christian activities, he worked for the British Council and for the Overseas Service of the BBC. In April 1942 he went for five weeks to Sweden with Bishop Bell, where, according to Hayward, he lectured for the British Council. It was on this visit, whose purpose was ostensibly to make contact with the Swedish Church, that Bishop Bell made contact with Hans Schönfeld and Dietrich Bonhoeffer who hoped through him to make approaches on behalf of an organized opposition to Hitler to the British Government. (20)

The point in bringing up these activities is not to underscore the driven quality of Eliot's exertions or his remarkable productivity during this period, though both seem evident and only more impressive in light of the chronic bronchitis and painful teeth extractions Gardner sympathetically chronicles (19). Instead, it is to emphasize Eliot's one-man approximation of the Community of Christians he

describes in *The Idea of a Christian Society*. Oldham had met Eliot at the Oxford Conference of 1937 (they were also together at Malvern) from which began the meetings of The Moot, a discussion group centered around Karl Mannheim, which also included Reckitt and some members of the Chandos Group as well as Mairet, who in addition to *New English Weekly* also stood on the editorial board of *Christian News-Letter*.⁵ *Four Quartets* represents a synthetic bridge between many of the highly individual beliefs of these discussants, not the least of which was their shared conviction that the clergy should have a role in public policy that was amply attempted by George Bell's diplomatic mission. The idea of Eliot joining a diplomatic mission to topple the Third Reich ecclesiastically is intriguing. It did not work, of course, but it represents a scale of active political engagement few have proved willing to attribute to the poet.

In the pages of *New English Weekly*, those readers unaware of Eliot's social commitments would find themselves quickly schooled about them, not only by Eliot's supporters (led by Demant, another participant of both conferences and The Moot), who explicitly remind them of his activities in their columns and letters to the editor but also by the tone of his secular-minded correspondents, who again and again accept Eliot's religious stances as insistent, active, and consistent. The journal proved a space for Eliot's friends to help him expand public exposure for his pet causes while preserving his public modesty by allowing him to remain tacit about his personal activities. The attacks he received there from his irreligious print adversaries only solidified the journal's collective efforts at reinforcing his persona of resolute conviction and sacerdotal asperity. They also helped him create a poetic persona to speak to his readers coherently and authentically.

Despite his many wartime endeavors, it might seem odd that the only mention *Four Quartets* makes of any of Eliot's "war jobs" appears in the penultimate section of "Little Gidding" (Eliot, "Art" 75), and even that reference is only an oblique allusion to his service as an air raid warden. Having imagined and mourned the martyred Anglican

⁵For more on these associations, see Roger Kojecky (156–97).

enclave of Little Gidding, readers suddenly find themselves in the London Blitz, strafed by a Luftwaffe transformed by the poem into “[t]he dove descending” which “breaks the air / With flame of incandescent terror” (“Little” 216). No sooner does “Little Gidding” incorporate this terror than it pauses to transfigure it:

Who then devised the torment? Love.
 Love is the unfamiliar Name
 Behind the hands that wove
 The intolerable shirt of flame. (216)

For many readers the suggestion that the capitalized typological banality of “Love” is behind the Blitz proves hopelessly problematic. One may suspect that this apocalyptic moment is actually a millenarian gesture signaling Eliot’s anticipation that an organic Christian enclave might somehow arise out of the city’s ruins. One may be appalled that Eliot would suggest divine sponsorship of torment (or that heaven would side with the Nazis) or even reject the too-quick rejoinder of “Love” as evidence of the despicable exigency of wartime, which requires responses so pat they risk condescension.

But the poem makes clear that the authority investing its assignment of blame derives not from theology but from shared sacrifice. Eliot by 1944 had banked his 1927 citizenship, his voluntary service as an air warden, and the harrowing experience of the Blitz itself against the credit of his lyric voice’s authority. The “intolerable shirt of flame” adorned not Eliot alone but an entire besieged polis, and as both a survivor and an active defender of the city, he had as much right as any other Londoner to try to make sense out of the event. When one then considers his *New English Weekly* persona of thoughtful devotion and persevering engagement, Eliot’s decision to limit the poem’s utterances to those evoking the shared victimhood of London represents understatement bordering on litotes. It also displays *Four Quartets*’s emphatic commitment to meet readers on their own terms: to construct a voice both equal to the reader’s experience and to the task of surmounting the problems remaining in the wake of World War II.

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