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# T.S. Eliot: A Never-Ending Exploration

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Honors Senior Thesis

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### T.S. Eliot: A Never-Ending Exploration

Considered one of the most important modernist poets of his age, T. S. Eliot was a literary genius, known for poetry that was often filled with nihilism and personal melancholy. Is it any wonder then, that Eliot compared his own life to “The horror! The horror!” experienced by Kurtz in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (Seymour-Jones 301). Battling the demons of his own mind, Eliot was able to produce poems like “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and “The Waste Land” as a result of these brooding thoughts; in fact, many literary critics believed that this internal pain is what helped to make so much of his poetry so complex, experimental, and experiential.

In 1927, Eliot converted to the Anglican church and began to produce works like the *Four Quartets*, charged with religious symbolism, which some critics saw as less successful and safer compared with his more experimental and exciting early poems. Eliot’s conversion triggered a shift in the way that his poetry was both, written and received. The promise of Christian salvation combined with religious references reflected in his later works affected his literary technique, as his poetry moved from exploratory innovation to more traditional stylistics. Even though the style of his poetry has changed, its quality and importance remained consistent. Indeed, as Barry Spurr observes,

“One of the reasons that Eliot’s poetry of his ‘Christian’ period speaks as strongly to the

contemporary world as his earlier nihilistic works - which seem more aligned to its values - is that he never imagines that religious belief, or the behavior which that belief entails, makes life or the acceptance of oneself, with all its demons, easier”(Spurr ).

In other words, even after his conversion, Eliot’s poetry still possesses the same poetic and literary relevance as his earlier non-religious works. This continuity lies in his recognition that even faith cannot completely eliminate internal turmoil. This turmoil, in fact, is the very reason why Eliot’s poetry before and after 1927 has the same impact and significance.

In my paper, I will show that Eliot’s poetry after his conversion to Catholicism is just as meaningful in its style and content as his early work. By examining his most notable poems pre and post conversion, I intend to demonstrate that both periods of his literary career define him as a great poet. I will also show that while his early poetry is fueled by the expansive agony of meaningless existence, his later poetry still contains the same agony that is now contracted and religiously focused. This transition from experimental to a more conventional style does not devalue his work, but rather demonstrates how Eliot continues to question himself at every turn, even after this new-found faith. While the content of his later poetry becomes more devout and less agitated, and the style shifts from daring to more conservative, it is still as bold and challenging as his early poems.

“Do I dare/Disturb the universe?” is a famous line that belongs to one of Eliot’s most known poems; published in 1915, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” characterizes Eliot’s early exploratory period as it largely hinges on themes of time and anxiety (Eliot 45-46). Indeed, Eliot’s obsession with time is apparent. “There will be time, there will be time,” Prufrock keeps repeating (26). His obsession with the word points towards his anxiety and quest for identity (Albertson 22). He is a self-conscious man who struggles with self-esteem and self-image.

Prufrock exclaims, “They will say: ‘How his hair is growing thin!’” He further cries out, “They will say: ‘How his arms and legs are thin!’” (41,44). The preoccupation with physical appearance and aging further suggests fear of time as it passes. Prufrock’s dread associated with “decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse” makes him feel agitated (48).

By creating this distressed persona of Alfred Prufrock, Eliot is able to show “[a] man who suffers and the mind which creates” (Spurr 49). Prufrock refers to himself as an object that is “pinned and wriggling on the wall,” which expresses his suffering. However, he also imagines himself as “a pair of ragged claws,” thereby creating a new identity within his own mind. These contrasting images enable Eliot to show the inside of his mind to the reader, exposing his most hidden thoughts. The complexity of this ability lies in the fact “Prufrock has no hope to be understood by others” yet he invites the audience to make their own judgements about his tale (Miller). In other words, they must figure out if Prufrock is directly speaking to them or to himself. This lack of clarity invites the reader to make his own predictions about Prufrock. Therefore “The Love Song” allows the reader to become interactive and deeply subjective. This very audience engagement creates a collective experience, making the work more experimental.

This experimentality is also seen in Prufrock’s inability to live in the present moment. The lines “But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed/Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter” indicate that even though time is still in the present moment, Prufrock’s mind has already seen his life pass before him (indicated by action verbs in the past tense) (81-81). “Time (...) has only a subjective existence for Prufrock. As a result, past, present, and future are equally immediate, and [he] is paralyzed” (Miller). The paralysis experienced by Prufrock translates to the audience, making the concept of time completely disappear because there is no reference. The interconnected relationship between

what is real and what is imaginary, coupled with Prufrock's perturbed state, allows Eliot to metaphorically stop time, and for the audience of the poem to experience it. This technique makes the poem especially interesting.

Another quality of Eliot's unconventional poetic technique, lies in his ability to use words to express his character's inability to communicate these words effectively. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" uses this technique as "Eliot's characters search for a language, for something to stand on, and for a word that which might express what they hope they might wish to say" (Watkins 33). Prufrock becomes a "patient etherized upon a table" (3). The word choice implies Prufrock's anaesthetic state which makes it difficult to vocalize his thoughts. In other words Prufrock "is aware that language has become detached from what needs to be expressed" when he says, "it is impossible to say just what I mean!" (104). He further adds, "I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker," (84) showing how Eliot plays a game with his reader because "For Prufrock, sincere language, or language that expresses what is felt is impossible" (Mayer 192). While he recognizes his greatness, he can never explain why he feels as though this greatness is leaving him "because thought can never apprehend, thus the mind can never sincerely express, the world of feeling as it is" (Mayer 193). By using language to describe Prufrock's self-conscious thoughts but not express them, this early work emerges as a lot more playful and innovative.

While it may seem that Prufrock is having a discussion with someone else, the whole poem is written as an internal monologue. "I have measured out my life in coffee spoons/ So how should I presume?" Prufrock wonders as if asking an invisible companion for advice (51-54). The indecisiveness of Prufrock leads him to "avoid intimacy, friendship, love (...) avoid all

actions, and take refuge in public things” (Watkins 34). Here, Prufrock’s rejection of all actions and constant questioning of the future can be linked to Eliot’s own self questioning.

In other words, Prufrock desperately wants to find meaning, something to hold onto, therefore emerging as an anxious and overly self-conscious character. This anxiety enables Eliot to give Prufrock a personality and a purpose. He cries out, “ No! I am not Prince Hamlet nor was meant to be,” which links him to this self-consciousness (111). While Prufrock is unable to explain the “overwhelming question” that haunts him, he knows that the question exists, and that he must keep searching for answers. However Eliot “is paralyzed by the consciousness of his tradition,” and this paralysis (much like the one he experiences with time) leads him to despair and suffering (Blasing). This suffering moves him to represent Prufrock as a “shy, cultivated, over sensitive Man of Early Modernism” creating a distinct identity (Mitchell). It is in this creation of Prufrock’s identity that Eliot “discovers his poetic consciousness-his Prufrock persona” (Mitchell). While he struggles with tradition, his early poetry acts as a vessel for Eliot to better understand himself, creating an opportunity for further poetic growth. This new-found opportunity is another example of the exploratory nature of this early work. In other words, the suffering experienced by Eliot infuses this early poem, making it a lot more personal and experiential.

Eliot’s inability to identify with the world that he lives is further discovered through Prufrock. He writes, “In the room women come and go/Talking of Michelangelo,” ridiculing societal norms of behavior such as keeping the conversation “light” (Blasing). It is this constraining idea of what a normal individual should think or act like (according to societal standards) that angers Prufrock. He doesn’t feel like he particularly fits anywhere, but he desperately wants to fit somewhere. The similarity between Prufrock’s longing for connection

and Eliot's desire to be accepted into the society further explains Eliot's poetic consciousness that eventually leads to his conversion.

By discovering his poetic persona through Prufrock, Eliot slowly begins to weave religious imagery and ideas into his work that foreshadow this conversion. Prufrock states that, "There is time to murder and create/And time for all the works and days of hands" (28-29). While the emphasis is still placed on time, there are certain biblical undertones that begin to peek through (Spurr 207). The 'time to murder' relates to the Ten Commandments (specifically the sixth, "thou shalt not kill") and the word 'create' alludes to the creation of Adam and Eve. The lines can also be connected to the biblical passage at the beginning of Ecclesiastes that goes, "A time to be born/ A time to kill" (Albertson 35). Moreover, Prufrock describes his head "brought upon a platter" and observes, "I am not prophet--and here's no great matter" (83). The image of the head alludes to John the Baptist's death as described in the gospels of Matthew and Mark. While Eliot introduces these biblical references into his work, he still renounces martyrdom because he wonders if it "would have been worthwhile" (Lockerd 159). Eliot continues to suffer the agony of feeling incomplete, and his experimentation proceeds in one of his most famous poems, *The Waste Land*.

First published in 1922 *The Waste Land* became Eliot's most celebrated poem. Similarly to "Prufrock", *The Waste Land* aims to capture the essence of being whole but unlike Prufrock who is the main speaker, *TWL* introduces multiple voices that speak in the mind of a conscience. While the introduction of multiple voices makes the poem a lot more compelling, I am more interested in Eliot's literary techniques that augment the poem and make it a lot more challenging. Specifically, similar to "Prufrock" the theme of time resurfaces in *TWL*. For example, Eliot writes in "A Game of Chess", "What shall I do now? What shall I do? [...] What

shall we do tomorrow/ What shall we ever do?" (Eliot II, 129-134). The anxiety associated with the passing hours coincide with Prufrock's idea that "In a minute there is time/ For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse" ("Prufrock 47-48). One of the voices that is speaking in the poem feels like time is working against it and is therefore uncertain of what to do next. The voice continues, "I didn't mince my words [...] HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME," as if waiting for something to happen (I, 141). While time is a prevalent element of the poem, Eliot's manipulation of time allows the reader to be in multiple locations simultaneously. This literary mastery is what makes *TWL* so different and unconventional, and compelling.

The first section "The Burial of the Dead" begins with an image of "the dead tree [that] gives no shelter, the cricket no relief/ And the dry stone no sound of water" (I, 23-24). Confronted with these opening lines, the reader begins a journey in what seems to be a lifeless and dry desert. However, as the poem unfolds, suddenly, the reader is transported into an "Unreal City/ Under the brown fog of a winter dawn" where "A crowd [flows] over London bridge" (I, 60-62). The genius of Eliot lies in his ability to effortlessly transport (and transform) his reader from an actual desert into "a desert of civilization which occurs at the end" (Watkins 50). The smooth transition that occurs in the poem enables Eliot to create an illusion of being at two dissimilar locations at the same time. The reader begins the poem in the summer, surrounded by "roots that clutch" and "branches [that] grow" only to find himself amongst "a winter dawn (...) up the hill and down King William Street" (I, 19, 66). The innovation of this early pre-conversion work stems from Eliot's ability to create a sense of excitement associated with concurrently being at two unlikely places, thus erasing the concept of time altogether. This technique allows the reader to feel the poem more and more mythically, and showcases the complexity of the work (Watkins 52).



While the idea of time is important, Eliot's literary artistry shines in his use of foreshadowing. Similar to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" Eliot uses this foreshadowing to hint at his conversion to the Anglican church. For example, the title of the first section "The Burial of the Dead" comes out of a prayer book indicating Eliot's pre-existing interest in religion. Eliot further describes "A heap of broken images" (22) which points to his growing interest in the church as this heap may refer to the image of Christ himself. Even though it seems unclear whether or not Eliot alludes to Christ in this particular line he does mention a "Son of a man" which strengthens this allusion.

In addition, the last part of the poem "What The Thunder Said" concludes the first stanza with, "He who was living is now dead/ We who are living are now dying," alluding to the death of Jesus and the slow decay of humanity as result of it (328-329). This allusion is important as it points towards Eliot's desire to become someone else, to discover a different part of himself. Overall, Eliot's decision to include subtle religious references throughout the poem suggest his growing desire for salvation. By planting these hints in this pre-conversion work, Eliot entices the audience to keep reading his poetry, emphasizing the mythical qualities associated with his early work. This longing allows Eliot to capture the reader's attention, and keep it.

The longing and feelings of anxiety continue in "A Game of Chess". Much like "Prufrock" the voice speaking in this section of the poem does not feel comfortable and complete in his own skin. He anxiously repeats "My nerves are bad to-night/Yes, bad/Stay with me/Speak to me/Why Do you never speak/Speak...[and so on]" (II, 111-114). The uneasiness and the desire of companionship expressed in the lines highlights Prufrock's questioning of the modern society that he lives in (which further demonstrates Eliot's own questioning as well). Made up of fragments, onomatopoeias, and foreign words *The Waste Land* uses language to describe the

impossibility of language; the same technique earlier demonstrated in “Prufrock” (Lewis). “Weialala leia/Wallala leialala,” (III, 277) the voice cries out in “The Fire Sermon”, trying to coherently communicate his thoughts, and failing. He continues with “ The river sweats/ Oil and tar/ The barges drift,” (III, 266) speaking in incomplete sentences. This child-like babbling illustrates the hopelessness associated with the inability to express oneself clearly. Therefore *The Waste Land* becomes Eliot’s attempt to attain a better understanding of himself, and feel complete. “These fragments I have shored against my ruins,” Eliot writes, as if hoping to find a way to connect the fragments together and become whole again (V, 430).

The isolation and alienation from society experienced by Prufrock continues in *The Waste Land*. “ The Burial of the Dead” opens with “April is the cruellest month, breeding/ Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing/ Memory and desire, stirring/ Dull roots with spring rain” (I, 1-4). The beginning lines of the poem allude to Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* in which Chaucer describes April as a month of growth, new beginnings, and fertility (Evans 41). Contrary to Chaucer’s joyful description, the voice that is speaking describes April as “the cruellest month”. Instead of relating it to the most lush and fecund period of the spring season, *TWL* compares it to “The dried life with little tubers”, implying death and decay (Lewis).

Additionally, the description of beautiful lilacs as flowers which come out of “the dead land” make whoever is speaking “unaffected by what usually seems to be the beauty in the world” (Watkins 45). The fact that the speaker does not enjoy nature further emphasizes the alienation and the sense of non-belonging experienced by Eliot. By rejecting the traditional view of nature as a source of nourishment and new life, this speaker rejects tradition, emerging as a rebel. This further illustrates Eliot’s own non-conformist attitude that makes his early poetry so original. Meanwhile, the invalidating society that Eliot lives in, creates a feeling that “The poet

lives in a modern waste land, in the aftermath of a great war, in an industrialized society that lacks traditional structures of authority and belief, in soil that may not be conducive to new growth" (Lewis). Much like "Prufrock" *The Waste Land* is fueled by Eliot's desire to find meaning in the world that seems to be absent of it.

Inspired by his own pain and suffering of feeling like an outsider in a post-war European society, Eliot is able to produce out-of-the-box poetry that is unconventional and observational. However, in 1927 Eliot converts to the Anglo-Catholicism, prompting many critics to say that this conversion killed the poet as his poetic power began to wane (Watkins 53). Although the new-found faith did alter the style of Eliot's poetry making it more traditional and focused, the same agony of constant questioning in a world devoid of meaning continued to haunt Eliot in his post-conversion works *Ash Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*.

Published in 1930, just three years after Eliot's conversion, *Ash Wednesday* marks the initial shift towards religious tradition but continues to be bold, much like "Prufrock" and *TWL*. While the content of the poem hinges on an apex between experiment and convention, its style remains inventive. The title of the work lightly suggests "components of Anglo-Catholicism--its penitential discipline and its liturgical expression" (Spurr 218). However the poem is still connected to Eliot's early experimental work in that it continues to question the new found faith. Even though the shift towards the divine begins to take place, Eliot's fear associated with spiritual conviction trumps convention and his exploratory methodology remains evident.

While *Ash Wednesday* continues in the style of Eliot's earlier poetry, it does resolve many of the questions raised in his "Prufrock" and *The Waste Land*. One of the major changes is that the concept of time no longer haunts the speaker. He calmly states "Because I know that time is always time (...) [and] Consequently I rejoice" (I, 16-24). Unlike Prufrock, the speaker of

*Ash Wednesday* does not ask “Will there be time?” but rather accepts it as an aspect of life that cannot be altered or stopped. Moreover, the use of the word “rejoice” suggests that Eliot begins to feel more hopeful and less agitated. The speaker no longer worries about the future “before the taking of toast and tea” (like Prufrock did ) but instead “rejoices that things are as they are.” The calm acceptance of the moment suggests that the speaker is comfortable with the idea of fate. “Our peace in His will,” he concludes, indicating that he believes in God’s plan for him (VI, 214). While Eliot appears calmer and less daring, largely relying on “God to have mercy,” *Ash Wednesday* faces the same unfocused agony of meaningless existence raised in his early poetry, “only now the poet marshals the word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God” (Meyer 434). This agony, although a lot more contracted, makes this later poem just as interesting as his early work.

Even though *Ash Wednesday* attempts to alleviate Eliot’s suffering “restoring/ With a new verse the ancient Rhyme [within him], the speaker continues to actively question this newfound faith, casting shadows of doubt (IV, 163). “Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?” the speaker wonders in the first part of the poem (I, 6). Much like his earlier work, *Ash Wednesday* presents the main speaker as a self-conscious man preoccupied with opinions of others (much like Prufrock). Moreover, the reference to the “aged eagle” evokes a sense of spiritual dryness and dissatisfaction (Kaveney 429). The image of an old bird describes Eliot’s conversion as a slow and burdensome process. Instead of describing his new-found faith as something that enables the bird to truly soar, Eliot describes them as “merely vans to beat the air/The air which is now thoroughly small and dry” (I, 35). The preceding lines do not evoke feelings of lightness and content associated with deep religious awakening, but rather imply a

feeling of barely holding on. Rather than taking flight, the eagle in *Ash Wednesday* is “pinned, and wriggling on the wall”, much like Prufrock.

Eliot may have converted, but this conversion does not eliminate his anxieties associated with the modern world. Instead, it reinforces “the overwhelming questions” proposed by J. Alfred Prufrock as the speaker continues to struggle with “the devil (...) who wears/ The deceitful face of hope and despair” (III, 128). The despair of feeling “small and dry”, only further highlights Eliot’s inability to answer it. Even though faith appears as a large focus of *Ash Wednesday*, the poetry does not read like a simple and traditional ode to God. It continues on as a desperate search for some sort of a resolution, a resolution that keeps “fading, fading.” The endless agony associated with feeling “damp [and] jagged” indicates that Eliot’s post-conversion poetry is cushioned by the presence of religion, but not completely absent of his pre-conversion despair. While the content becomes more religious, the poem remains unconventional.

In the context of *The Waste Land*, *Ash Wednesday* succeeds in eliminating the alienation associated with “a modern waste land” discussed earlier. Unlike the speaker in *The Waste Land* who sees spring as the season of death, the speaker of *Ash Wednesday* sees beauty and color in the world around him. The Lady introduced in the second section of the poem is seen to walk “in white and blue, in Mary’s colour” in the fourth section (Spurr 221). The color blue here symbolizes water, sky, purity, and lightness, which in turn imply salvation (Spurr 221). With “White light folded, sheathing about her, folded/ The new years walk, restoring,” (IV, 161). Mary has the power to revive the dry and unwelcoming landscape described in *The Waste Land* (Spurr 222). While the lilacs come out of “the dead land” in *The Waste Land*, the lilacs in *Ash Wednesday* are compared to “sweet brown hair”, a much more feminine and nurturing image implying beauty and fertility.

Even though *Ash Wednesday* attempts to eliminate the isolation and alienation present in Eliot's early poetry, it does not succeed, continuing to distance him [the speaker] from God (Kaveney 435). The first verse opens with, "Because I do not hope to turn/ Because I do not hope/ Because I do not hope to turn" (I, 9) rejecting any possibility of salvation. He negates all hope, repeating "I do not hope to turn" several times, indicating that his conversion will never fully take place. In this case, Eliot finds himself unable to turn, therefore refusing salvation and inviting further suffering (Spurr 219). The suffering that is "smaller and drier than the will" prevents the speaker from being fully consumed by his faith. By refusing to completely accept this new faith, the speaker refuses to accept the modern society of tradition. Refusal of tradition is another example of Eliot's exploratory methods continuing to resurface in his post-conversion work.

This scenario is also found in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". Just as Prufrock "turns back to descend the stair" because he cannot bear to be surrounded by a society that will judge him, the speaker in *Ash Wednesday* turns away from religion. Eliot writes, "At the first turning of the second stair/ I turned and saw below.../ The deceitful face of hope and despair" (III, 123-128). While the speaker climbs the stair in *Ash Wednesday* (symbolizing rising hope) as opposed to descending it (as seen in "Prufrock"), the stair metaphor in both of the poems indicates his uneasiness and fear of tradition, be it societal or religious. Even though the speaker continues his ascent up to the top, he exclaims, "Lord, I am not worthy" (III, 144). This self-proclaimed rejection further shows how the speaker of *Ash Wednesday* "is pursued on a staircase by sinister ghosts and urban squalor – is the evocation of a Lady, who is the Virgin" (Kaveney 437). The vision of "twisting [and] turning" figures at the bottom of the stair symbolize the Virgin Mary. In other words, instead of presenting her as a pure virgin, the speaker sees her as a series of

collective shadows denying her purity and virgin-like descriptions. Much like Prufrock who presents women as a disturbing image of “white and bare braceleted hands,” the speaker in *Ash Wednesday* does the same by using unconventional language to describe Mary.

Even though Eliot’s *Ash Wednesday* marks his post-conversion period, it is still faced with the same agony of meaningless and isolated existence. While the poem does present a more focused, religious context, the questions raised in his early poetry do not diminish. *Ash Wednesday* remains experimental and experiential, continuing to wrestle with Eliot’s internal demons. New-found religion or not, there is no reduction of complexity in the poem, and it is just as brooding as his earlier work.

Moving along in his journey as a newly devout man, Eliot writes the *Four Quartets*, one of his most substantial poems, and one regarded by various critics as his masterpiece (Headings 119). According to these critics, the *Four Quartets* emerges as “a creative theology” and “a great lyric of history” (Rajan 95). Others see it as a terrible beginning of Eliot’s “new ‘flat’ style” that does not have much poetic content and is rather banal (Bradford 219). While the poem receives mixed opinions fueled by contrasting views, its context and style, as it relates to Eliot’s post-conversion writings, is again of interest.

Unlike *Ash Wednesday*, which continues the experimentality of Eliot’s early poems, *Four Quartets* explores the question, “How carnal is the incarnation of the spirit?”, thus becoming more religiously focused and concrete (Watkins 77).

Eliot’s shift towards a more religious poetic ground can be seen in his essay “Milton II”. Eliot fills the essay with many Biblical references such as, “When we visit Adam and Eve in Eden”, and refers to a kind of “earthly Paradise” (Eliot 178). Here he defends poetry of belief on religious rather than artistic ground, further highlighting the change in his attitude and style

(Watkins 77). It is no wonder then that *Four Quartets* signifies a beginning of a new, more spiritually aware Eliot. *Four Quartets* shows this awareness by using certain images and sounds that suggest a transcendent experience (Watkins 81).

Some of the imagery that most vividly points to these experiences are the images of bells and birds described in the poem (Watkins 82). Eliot uses imagery and sounds associated with the bell multiple times throughout his poem. These first appear in the fourth section of “Burnt Norton”. The lines “Time and bell have buried the day” suggest morbidity and implies the night time as the day gets buried (I,iv,1). The bells then reappear in several passages of “The Dry Salvages”. The bells described here are a lot more active and actually emanate sounds. “The tolling bell/ Measures time” and “The ground swell (...) Clangs/ The bell” lead to “The Silent listening to the undeniable/ Clamour of the bell of the last annunciation” (II,i,37-39). As opposed to presenting these images as ordinary, Eliot gives them the function of messengers “between the mortal and the immortal” (Watkins 83). Because the image of the bells represents them as something bigger, as “the ground swell[s]”, the line can be linked to a supernatural force that creates the “clamour” (in this case this supernatural force is God) (Watkins 83). Moreover, Eliot uses the phrase “perpetual angelus” meaning the annunciation of the divine will (Moody 30). The imagery and language of this section strongly suggest Eliot is attempting to communicate to a more devout audience. It is not as abstract and troubled as Prufrock’s lamenting of modern society, or the multiplicity of fragmented voices found in *The Waste Land*.

Similarly, references to birds in “Burnt Norton” showcase Eliot’s shift to a more traditional and concrete style in his poetry. The fourth section concludes with “Down on us? After the kingfisher’s wing/ Has answered light to light and is silent, the light is still.” This particular line is interesting because here the “antithesis of silence is not sound, but reflected



light, an image of vision” (Watkins 84). The “vision” described by Eliot refers to his newly found religious enlightenment and hints at a new stage in his poetic career. In addition, the line opposes *The Waste Land* which describes “Looking into the heart of light, the silence” (*TWL* 41). While the voice in *TWL* finds no meaning and no spiritual nourishment in the light, the speaker of *Four Quartets* sees the opposite, a chance at salvation.

Furthermore, the image of “The dove descending” presented in “Little Gidding” represents “the appearance of the Holy Ghost in the form of a dove” (Watkins 84). While Eliot does use a metaphor of a dove to describe the image of a Holy Ghost and does not explicitly state that it is what he is talking about, there is a certain amount of consciousness and concreteness associated with this comparison, implying the poet’s move into a new realm of pious poetry (Wagner 27). Unlike “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” that introduces Prufrock as “Politic, cautious, and meticulous,” the speaker in “East Coker” mentions that “The only wisdom we hope to acquire/ Is the wisdom of humility; humility is endless” (III, ii, 99). The humble tone here suggests Eliot’s more hopeful attitude towards the future that comes as a result of conversion. He no longer sees the world as the “Unreal city/ Under a brown fog of a winter noon” but a “rose-garden (...) out of heart of light.” The contrasting images of light and thick, dirty fog, show Eliot’s transition from agitation to peacefulness.

Finally, Eliot begins to use religious symbolism in order to show how the post-conversion has affected his life. The style shift of his poetry is also quite apparent here, as Eliot consciously aims to use spiritual references in order to showcase his knowledge of religion. The speaker exclaims, “Hints followed by guesses; and the rest/ Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought, and action” (II, v, 214). Although it is unclear what kind of a hint the speaker is talking about, it is safe to assume that he is curious about what life as a faith-based man is like. In turn, this

reflects upon Eliot's own questioning of religion. "The hint half guessed [and] the gift half understood, is Incarnation" (II, v, 216) the persona in the poem continues. The capitalization of the word 'incarnation' refers to Jesus, implying some sort of belief in the higher power. The word itself implies hope and eternal life, opposing fear and despair experienced by "Prufrock", and death and decay described in *The Waste Land*.

Despite the poem's religious underpinnings, *Four Quartets* continues with the theme of agony that sweeps through Eliot yet again. While *Four Quartets* is not nearly as experimental as *Ash Wednesday*, the poem uses the same techniques to show that even faith cannot completely eliminate a man's suffering. T.S. Eliot does attempt to use fleshly images to convey the sense of the divine, but seldom accomplishes that due to the ever-present agony that continues to haunt him (Watkins 78). It is no wonder that *Four Quartets* is considered one of Eliot's many successes. The poem does not simply focus on Eliot's complete religious conversion. Instead, much of the agony and suffering explored in his earlier poetry does not go away, but merely becomes a lot more focused around the idea of questioning religion and God.

One of the techniques that still points to this agony is Eliot's never-ending preoccupation with the theme of time. The speaker of the poem opens with, "Time present and time past/ Are both perhaps present in time future/ And time future contained in time past/ If all time is eternally present/ All time is unredeemable" (I, i, 1-5). Here, the word "time" is repeated seven times in the first opening lines. The incessant repetition of the word, automatically shows Eliot's inability to let go and just be present in the present. Instead, he recounts the full paradigm of "points in the temporal line that in relation to one another (past, present, and future) or else the absence of temporality itself" (Levina 201).

Similar to *The Waste Land* which allowed its reader to be at two different settings simultaneously, *Four Quartets* plays with the idea of time as totally static and unmoving. The idea of time as something that is static is completely borrowed from Eliot's early poetry, and it makes an appearance in the very first few lines of the *Four Quartets*. This metaphorical stopping prevents the poem from being too conventional as it transform time into "a spatially imagined line in which the past , the present, and the future, follow each other, and happen at the same time as each other (Levina 202). This spatial view of time borrows from Eliot's early techniques as in Prufrock's "have measured out his life in coffee spoons" and in "The Dry Salvages" "The tolling bell/ Measures time." There is no escaping these measurements, and Eliot shows that even divine intervention cannot make him forget the ticking clock. He does not feel calm with the passing of time, nor does the thought of it passing comfort him.

Like time, the use of structure and language (or the lack of it) are also techniques that are used by Eliot to hint at the experimentality of the *Four Quartets*. While the speaker does mention "thought, discipline, and action" he actually "lament[s] the impossibility of explaining the ineffable in language." (Anderson 136). Just as Prufrock exclaims, "It is impossible to say just what I mean!" the speaker in "Burnt Norton" describes "Words [that] strain/ Crack and sometimes break, under the burden (...) Will not stay still" (I, v, 152-153). The breaking and the cracking of words in "Burnt Norton" relate to the agony associated with the impossibility of communication in *The Waste Land*. The images of "Red and Gold/ Wide/ White Towers" (*TWL* 283) are presented as a collection of broken and cracked sentence fragments, aimlessly strung together in "The Fire Sermon." These same sentence fragments "slip, slide, [and] perish," become nothing but a collection of negative action verbs. While "The burden" identified by the speaker, further indicates "the darkness of God" coming upon him in "East Coker." By

comparing God to darkness, the speaker describes “the fear of possession/ of belonging to another/ or to others/ or to God” (II,ii, 96-97). The terror of being possessed by the Divine creates a sense of anxiety and agony earlier experienced by Prufrock; belonging to God in this case is akin to being “pinned and wriggling on the wall.” This feeling of being trapped feeds into the impossibility of language, as the terror experienced by the speaker has the same paralyzing effect as Prufrock’s inability to express himself.

Aside from the use of language, *Four Quartets* is a much more experimental poem because it uses unconventional metaphors to present God as a malicious ruler. This comparison also challenges the theme of incarnation discussed earlier. The fourth part of “East Coker” presents Christ as “The wounded surgeon [who] plies the steel (...) with the sharp compassion of the healer’s art.” Contrary to the traditional images of Christ as a benevolent, evangelical figure of light and healing, Eliot’s Christ appears as an evil, ungodlike Christ who wishes to inflict pain onto his patients (Watkins 88). While Eliot does imply that there can be no salvation without suffering, the suffering and pain expressed in these lines trump any chance of salvation (Watkins 88).

In addition, the image of Christ as a ruthless surgeon originates in *The Waste Land*. “The Fire Sermon” concludes with, “burning burning burning burning/ O Lord Thou pluckest me out.” The action of plucking and burning resembles Eliot’s pain-inflicting Christ in “East Coker.” The verb “to pluck” also implies removal of something or someone from a certain place. Perhaps the plucking and plying of the steel suggests Eliot’s God-fearing attitude. He does not see God as a noble king that must be worshipped, but as a torturer who must be escaped. Both of the figures in *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets* do not resemble the true and all-loving Christ. The unusual comparison to a pain bearing scientist suggests Eliot’s agony associated with being physically

“plucked” away by religion. This agony is what propels *Four Quartets* into a more daring and challenging literary style. It is just as bold as his early poetry, perhaps even more bold, for Eliot goes as far as to question the goodness of God himself.

T.S. Eliot was a great poet, but his greatness did not come from being a Harvard student who was well-versed in philosophy and literary criticism. The thing that made T.S. Eliot so distinguished was his “profound but unsettling interrogation of ideas of tradition” (Brand). His internal suffering and constant contemplation of the world, infused all of his poetry with this sense of “having the experience but missing the meaning” as described in the latter part of *Four Quartets*. I use the word “all of his poetry” because contrary to some critics’ beliefs that the genius of Eliot died after his conversion, many other critics saw how Eliot’s poetic career was never diminished by this conversion. His style may have shifted, however the poetry remained contemplative and self-questioning.

The best way to describe Eliot’s stylistic shift is perhaps to draw a literary comparison. His major poems enact a kind of “Dantean pilgrimage from the inferno of the modern soul through the purgatorial fires of self-abnegation to a foretaste of paradisaic communion” (Crawford). Thus, following the course of my essay, “Prufrock” and *The Waste Land* symbolize the initial inferno; the troubled and experimental Eliot, caught in an unfocused agony of meaningless existence. *Ash Wednesday* attempts to battle Eliot’s self-doubt by offering a more religious focus, however still borrowing from the challenging style of Eliot’s pre-conversion works. Lastly, *Four Quartets* emerges as a “foretaste of communion”; however, the word “foretaste” is key. This poem does not mark Eliot’s complete acceptance of salvation, but rather gives a small preview of what this salvation could be like, while it continues to question God.

Thus, Eliot's stylistic shift after 1927 can be described as a "pilgrimage, an instance of our common journey of sanctification, (...) hardly a holiday excursion" (Crawford).

This pilgrimage described by Brand is "a search for order realized through unsentimental engagement with present-day reality and a sustained and discriminating conversation with tradition, all to approach the possibility of a hope beyond tradition" (Crawford). As Prufrock opens with "Let us go" marking a clear fusion of modernity and self-consciousness, *The Waste Land* continues with developing Prufrock's uneasy persona into multiple voices within a singular consciousness (Brand). The agony associated with the modern world and the self is suppressed in *Ash Wednesday* as the speaker exclaims "And pray that I may forget/ These matters that with myself I too much discuss/ Too much explain." Even though prayer is introduced in Eliot's later poetry, the suffering continues, but now takes a more concentrated religious focus in *Four Quartets* "pointing to the agony/ Of death and birth."

Thomas Stearns Eliot is an enigma, a mystical poet who "transmuted his personal suffering into something greater (...) that he did through the enlarging perspective of tradition" (Crawford). After his conversion to the Anglican church, Eliot never ceased his search for something big, bold, and brilliant. He never quit being agonized by demons, whether they were the demons of the modern world, or the dark angels of religious salvation. He reflected this in his work. While his later poetry was written in a more orthodox and straightforward style, it still exhibited Eliot's undeniable poetic greatness. His post-conversion poems continue to explore the meaninglessness of existence and self-doubt present in his earlier poetry. However, unlike the exhaustive agony seen in those works, Eliot's later poetry specifically focuses on religious agony, and a deep searching of his faith. Thomas Eliot did not stop being a great poet, he merely became

a different kind of great poet. For, “We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” (T.S Eliot).

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