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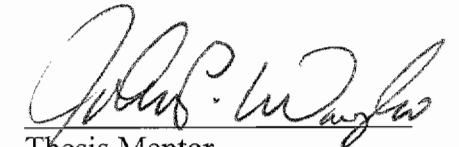
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“Shall I at least set my lands in order”: T.S. Eliot, the Transcendental Signifier,
and the Ordering of Language and Desire in *Four Quartets*

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Abstract

Even though *Four Quartets* lacks the explicit depictions of sexuality and sordid interactions of humanity that characterized many of T.S. Eliot's earlier works, desire remains a central concern of the poet. While in *The Waste Land*, he indicts the oppressive binary nature of sexuality in bourgeois society for the sterility of modern life, the scope of *Four Quartets* is more focused upon the guilt, desire, and struggle of the individual. Anticipating the post-modern linguistics of Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida, Eliot recognizes fundamentally fragmented nature of language, which results in an inability to unite the self and order desire. Furthermore, the subversive, disruptive power that he repeatedly finds in poetic language corresponds with Julia Kristeva's postulation of the semiotic, a facet of language tied to the mother that predates the law of the father and often undermines it. It is only in taking a Kierkegaardian "leap to faith," a personal movement marked by paradox and absurdity, that Eliot is able to embrace a transcendental signifier, which serves as a source of meaning and basis of hope; this is found throughout the poem, but its locus in the realm of sexuality conveys an underlying phallogocentrism that is not as apparent in *The Waste Land*.

I could not / Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither / Living nor dead, and I knew nothing, / Looking into the heart of light, the silence.

T.S. Eliot- *The Waste Land*

The Word in the desert / Is most attacked by voices of temptation.

T.S. Eliot- *Burnt Norton*

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.

John 1:1-4

In his Forward to a recent religious reading of T.S. Eliot's late masterpiece, *Four Quartets*, George William Rutler offers the following assessment: "Eliot comes to the modernist lattice window like the lover in the Song of Solomon, furtively chanting a benign proposal of which all this world's lights and shadows are intimations" (11-12). He goes on to claim that Eliot "witnesses to the Doctors of the Church in this: the intellect is supernaturally perfected by the light of glory" (12). The general sentiment is not uncommon; *Four Quartets* has recently emerged in contemporary discourse as something of a devotional tract, a guide to the everyday Christian in prayer and spirituality. From James E. Booty's *Meditating on Four Quartets* to Thomas Howard's *Dove Descending*, and most recently Kenneth Paul Kramer's *Redeeming Time*, the orthodoxy of belief and clarity of spiritual vision of the poem seems to be accepted without question or qualification.¹ Rutler's analogy is interesting, however, in its parallel of Eliot and a secretive lover. While not his intent, Rutler broaches the issue of sexuality and even the suggestion that it intimately informs the poem's progression and meaning. While rarely examined, this insight is not entirely new to Eliotic studies, though approached from a different perspective; several recent scholars have argued that *Four Quartets* is both linked to and informed by various aspects of Eliot's personal sexual disorientation, including misogyny,

homophobia, repressed homosexuality, and a persistent chauvinism. The implications and manifestations of these attitudes, of course, have been examined quite thoroughly in *The Waste Land*, but there has been a striking and inexplicable paucity of discussion concerning their role and presence in the later poem(s). We are thus compelled to ask, if we are to entertain and extend Rutler's metaphor, who is the lover being wooed by Eliot and what is her(his) role in the poem?

Written over the course of the two decades after the 1922 publication of Eliot's modernist epic, *The Waste Land*, critics generally acknowledge that *Four Quartets* engages many of the same themes and takes up the same struggles as the earlier work. However, while Eliot's major works, *The Waste Land* (particularly its drafts) and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," are frequently invoked in discussions of his misogyny and sexual confusion, *Four Quartets* is largely disregarded; the reasons for this critical neglect are unclear.² Consequently, along with examining the role of sexuality in the poem, we might also ask, does the poem present the same conception of women and sexuality in general, or did age bring about a change in Eliot's position? Does Eliot seek to repudiate his earlier views, or does he extend them and examine their implications?

Even though *Four Quartets* lacks the explicit depictions of sexuality and sordid interactions of humanity that characterized many of Eliot's earlier works, desire remains a central concern of the poet. While in *The Waste Land*, he indicts the oppressive binary nature of sexuality in bourgeois society for the sterility of modern life, the scope of *Four Quartets* is more focused upon the guilt and desire of the individual. If the former poem is a study and depiction of the nature of sexuality, the latter is a meditation upon the human response, both actual and ideal, to the struggle of existing, relating, and communicating in a sexually fragmented world. In

Four Quartets, Eliot argues for the necessity of attempting to impose a pattern on the chaos of sexuality, despite the seeming futility of all such efforts, for it is in this struggle, this “dance,” as he characterizes it, that meaning and even, perhaps, the longed for “shantih,” can be found. Even while acknowledging the persistent fragmentation of world and self that he depicted in *The Waste Land*, Eliot posits the possibility of and need for a transcendental signifier, admittedly imperfect, as a source of meaning and basis of hope; this is found throughout the poem, but its locus in the realm of sexuality is of note, as it conveys an underlying phallogocentrism that was not present in *The Waste Land*.

I. Structural and Theoretical Considerations: “That was a way of putting it”

On a structural level, both in relation to *The Waste Land* and in and of itself, *Four Quartets* enacts the development in Eliot’s frustration and struggle with order and chaos, words and meaning, the unified self and fragmentation. This wrestling with language is not new to his work; recall the anguished exclamation of Prufrock: “It is impossible to say just what I mean!” (104). The form and content of *The Waste Land* conveyed this contention that language had failed by employing multiple, shifting, and unnamed narrators, radically disjunctive stanzas, and continual subversion of the reader’s attempts to isolate and understand who is speaking and what is being said. There is no “I,” no unified subject, no tyranny of monologism, quite the opposite in fact. In many ways, the text enacts the dialogism and discourse of the carnival that Mikhail Bakhtin theorized and Julia Kristeva examines in “Word, Dialogue, Novel.” Her observations about the epic and novel can be applied to Eliot’s text: “Within the carnival, the subject is reduced to nothingness, while the structure of *the author* emerges as anonymity that creates and sees itself created as self and other, as man and mask” (49). This subsuming of the subject is at

the center of the experience of *The Waste Land* and emerges from the fragmentation of the self, both sexual and linguistic.³

Four Quartets, however, shuns the structural tropes of disorientation that proliferate in *The Waste Land*, instead providing a single unified narrator (we shall leave questions concerning the degree of his unification for later). It is, in many ways, the opposite of a dialogic or carnivalesque text. As Kristeva explains, “Disputing the laws of language based on the 0-1 interval, the carnival challenges God, authority, and social laws; insofar as it is dialogical, it is rebellious” (49). This, undoubtedly, is found in *The Waste Land*. With its monologic narrative structure, *Four Quartets* appears to do the reverse, affirming God, authority, and social laws; this would explain its appeal to Rutler and other contemporary devotional writers. However, the linguistic orthodoxy of the text, and consequently its conception of gender and sexuality, is not so straightforward. There is still an obvious frustration with attempts to impose a pattern on the chaos of reality. The structure of the poem conveys this, with its alterations between highly stylized, structured verse and long stretches of free and blank verse. It is as if Eliot cannot settle on an effective form within which to couch his meaning. However, even here, the contrast with *The Waste Land* is clear; while Eliot may shift from long lines to short, from rhyme to unrhymed verse, the beginning and ending of each of these forms is clearly defined. Gone is the mesmerizing, though often unsettling, “messiness” of *The Waste Land*.

The frustration with both finding and conveying meaning is not only suggested on a structural level, but is also present in the actual language of the poem, even as language itself is being critiqued. Prufrock’s exclamation is transformed into an insight into language in *Four Quartets*, with Eliot’s marvelous poetic articulation and anticipation of the postmodern linguistics of Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Julia Kristeva:

Words strain,
 Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
 Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
 Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
 Will not stay still. (149-53)

This sliding of the signifier (we could relate it to Derrida's *différance*) is simply a consequence of language, but is also intimately and inextricably related to the identity and construction of the self. In her introduction to a collection of Lacan's essays, Juliet Mitchell concisely states the plight of humanity: "The human animal is born into language and it is within the terms of language that the human subject is constructed. Language does not arise from the individual, it is always out there in the world... Language always 'belongs' to another person" (5). Thus, as sign and signifier are arbitrarily assigned, as language is fundamentally fragmented, so the self cannot be unified, though it embraces an illusory unity during what Lacan termed "the mirror stage," which is the advent of desire.⁴ That is to say, the reason that Eliot often repeats himself in *Four Quartets*, the reason that he feels trapped by the "intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings" (70-71) and declares that "knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies" (84), is because he is struggling with how meaning can be attained and pronounced by an essentially fragmented self.

A further examination of the construction of the self is necessary if we are to understand Eliot's frustration with language and the closely related struggle of to impose order on the chaos of sexuality. Trapped within language, Lacan states that "man cannot aim at being whole (the 'total personality' is another of the deviant premises of modern psychotherapy), while ever the play of displacement and condensation to which he is doomed in the exercise of his functions

marks his relation as a subject to the signifier” (“The signification” 287). He then posits a clear link between language and sexuality with the phallus: “The phallus is the privileged signifier of that mark in which the role of the logos is joined with the advent of desire” (“The signification” 287). The law of language, the law of the father, is represented by the signification of the phallus. Butler provides a concise summary of the implications of Lacan’s theory, with regard to language and desire:

The paternal law structures all linguistic signification, termed “the Symbolic,” and so becomes a universal organizing principle for culture itself. This law creates the possibility for meaningful language and, hence, meaningful experience, through the repression of primary libidinal drives, including the radical dependency of the child on the maternal body. (101)

The implications of this are essential to understanding the way in which *Four Quartets* moves beyond *The Waste Land* and the significance of Eliot’s consistent intertwining of meaning and desire. The poem is an expression of the poet’s need for order, for knowing, for meaning, whether it be a beginning or an end, for they are the same place and thing. He could find none of this in *The Waste Land*.

However, Lacan’s articulation of the Symbolic as the sole foundation and basis of language is insufficient in dealing with Eliot’s deliberations over language and desire in *Four Quartets*. The subversive, disruptive power that he repeatedly finds in language, poetic language, corresponds with Kristeva’s postulation of the semiotic. A facet of language tied to the mother, the semiotic predates the law of the father and often undermines it. Articulated most clearly in *East Coker*, Eliot repeatedly recognizes this element of desire and language that cannot be controlled or ordered. This, in fact, is at the center of his struggle to attain meaning, for the

semiotic is a constant reminder of the illusory nature of any certainties he tries to reach.

Kristeva, in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, briefly explains that, “through the particularity of its signifying operations,” this poetic language “is an unsettling process—when not an outright destruction—of the identity of meaning and speaking subject, and consequently of transcendence or, by derivation, or ‘religious sensibility’” (125).⁵ While Eliot undoubtedly recognizes this function of language, he cannot bring himself to accept it, and continually attempts to find the basis for embracing a transcendental signifier that orders all language.

II. Background: “If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable”

Before approaching *Four Quartets*, we must understand the framework of the discussion, that is, the role of sexuality in Eliot’s work as well as the basis of the charges of misogyny, sexual confusion, and homophobia that are leveled against him. The foundation of gender criticism concerning Eliot’s work can be traced to a 1952 study in *Essays in Criticism* by critic John Peter, entitled, “A New Interpretation of *The Waste Land*.” Peter, based solely upon a close textual reading of the poem, speculated that *The Waste Land* can be more easily understood if it is read as an elegy for a lost friend, presumably male, “a modern Tennyson and a modern Hallam, as it were” (144). His explication of the poem is fascinating for three primary reasons. The first is the suggestion that homosexuality informed the poem on some significant level. Though he does not explore the implications of this for Eliot, later critics have done so extensively. The second reason, which is tied to and in some ways even more important than the first, is the imputation of a deeply personal motive in a work by the author who propounded the “impersonal theory of poetry.” It opened up the possibility of reading Eliot’s poetry against his rules. Finally, Peter’s essay continues to fascinate scholars because Eliot went of out his way to

silence it. As Peter reveals in the Postscript accompanying the 1973 republication of the essay, ten years after the poet's death, Eliot had threatened to sue the editors of *Studies in Criticism* for libel, and made sure that the essay was removed from all further printings of the journal. Later critics, notably James E. Miller, have seized upon these three aspects, along with hints and scraps from later writings and the posthumous publication of Eliot's letters and juvenilia, in order to erect a theory concerning the poet's repressed homosexual desires and the "true" meaning of the poem.⁶ These readings, which originally were focused on *The Waste Land*, have been extended to *Four Quartets*, though not extensively. This connection is nevertheless of importance, as it forms a necessary portion of any criticism concerning sexuality in the poem and indeed most explorations of sexuality in *Four Quartets* are variations on this theme.

Miller, focusing on bits and pieces of biography, provides one of the earlier and more extensive discussions of Eliot's sexuality and its direct connection to *Four Quartets* in his 1990 essay, "*Four Quartets* and 'an acute personal reminiscence.'" It is, as Miller admits, an extension of his work on *The Waste Land*, utilizing the same foundation, building upon it with portions of the text and some of Eliot's criticism and correspondence. While the argument has its shortcomings, it must be examined, because it is one of the few studies that attempts to understand and explicate the vision of sexuality that informs and underlies *Four Quartets*, while also exploring the poem's connection to *The Waste Land*. It begins with an overview of Eliot's brief relationship with a French medical student, Jean Verdenal; speculations about Eliot's homosexual fantasies and their manifestations in his verse are rooted in the year he spent with the youth in Paris.⁷ Miller also includes an oblique suggestion of a homoerotic element coloring the relationship of Eliot and John Hayward.⁸ The direct relevance of these events to *Four Quartets* is not examined; Miller claims that he mentions them because they cannot "be

dismissed as irrelevant for the psychoanalytic-oriented readers interested in probing beneath the surface of literary texts for those aspects of personality that reveal the essence of an individual and his life” (224). This may be true, but it would only seem that direct textual relationships, or at least that suggestion of a textual relationship, would fall within the domain of literary criticism. Miller does provide this in the second portion of the essay, articulating a more explicit connection between “the familiar compound ghost” who appears in *Little Gidding* and Eliot’s artistic expression of his personal sexuality.

The encounter with the ghost is obviously a vital moment in the poem and, in many ways, the direction in which it is interpreted fundamentally affects one’s reading of the entire poem. In his lecture, “What Dante Means to Me,” Eliot spoke briefly of writing the passage and how it was “the nearest equivalent to a canto of the Inferno or the Purgatorio, in style as well as content,” that he was capable of producing (128). He went on to comment on the extreme difficulty of the endeavor: “The section of a poem—not the length of one canto of the Divine Comedy—cost me far more time and trouble and vexation than any passage of the same length that I have ever written” (129). This statement, which Miller reads as a confession of sorts, figures prominently in his rendering of the scene. Before proceeding with the significance of Eliot’s struggle to write, however, Miller provides a connection that links “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” *The Waste Land*, and *Four Quartets*, a connection he claims is evidence of “a personal anguish so acute as to be barely contained beneath the surface of the poems” (226).

The tie that binds these poems, separated by significant periods of time, and serves as the basis for Miller’s rendering of the ghost-encounter, is the recurrence of Canto 26 from Dante’s *Purgatorio*.⁹ Eliot acknowledged the canto’s importance personally when it was pointed out by I.A. Richards in 1926. Canto 26 deals with a portion of the seventh terrace of Purgatory, where

the lustful are refined; specifically, it concerns the sodomites and hermaphroditic lustful, as well as the celebrated lyric poets, Guido Guinizzelli and Arnaut Daniel. It is called to mind in *Little Gidding*, with the final words spoken by the “compound ghost,” evoking Purgatorial punishment: “From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit / Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire / Where you must move in measure, like a dancer” (144-146). The evocation of the canto is clear, its implications are perhaps not as straightforward as Miller suggests, and significantly, the identity and precise nature of this compound ghost is shrouded in ambiguity.¹⁰

Miller argues that an understanding of the ghost can be wrought from a letter Eliot sent to Hayward, expressing his frustration with the passage: “The defect of the whole poem, I feel, is the lack of some acute personal reminiscence (never to be explicated, of course, but to give power from well below the surface) and I can *perhaps* supply this is Part II” (qtd. in Miller 231). Miller believes this to be a reference to Verdenal, who, he argues, serves a similar function as an “acute” personal inspiration for *The Waste Land*, and inhabits the “familiar” ghost. He acknowledges, however, that the ghost is compound, and goes on to read it as an amalgamation of Verdenal and the elder Yeats, who Eliot admired for his clear and direct articulation of the “rage” and “lust” that persisted in aged men (234).¹¹ In this regard, his reading is like many others; the compound but “unidentifiable” nature of the ghost has led to considerable critical speculation as to its various identities.¹² While there is some value in seeking the specific identity of the ghost, any limitation of its nature to that of particular individuals is not only reductive, but also shifts the focus away from Eliot’s internal dialogue. That is, to say that Yeats and Verdenal inform the ghost and its words, as well as the poet’s reaction is valuable; to claim that they are the totality of its presence is not.

Miller's reading is intriguing but ultimately unsatisfactory. Its most significant shortcoming is not its thesis or methodology, but rather its failure to address the poem in its entirety, or even the issue of sexuality in the poem as a whole. The assertion that sexuality, Eliot's personal sexuality, is an important subtext of the poem, begs for further examination. Instead of providing it, Miller is content with positing that codified homosexuality informs portions of "Little Gidding," primarily the encounter with the ghost in section II; the broader significance of this, with regard to both Eliot and the poem itself, is left unaddressed. Recently, a more comprehensive, less overtly biographical approach, has been provided by Peter Middleton. In "The masculinity behind the ghosts of modernism in Eliot's *Four Quartets*" Middleton, too, examines the role of sexuality, focusing upon the nature of "familiar compound ghost." However, he does not use occasions in Eliot's life to explicate the text, but rather focuses his psychoanalytic reading primarily upon Eliot's writings, tying his conclusions to the poet's life when the connection is particularly strong or salient.

Beginning with the fact that *Burnt Norton* was presented to the public in two drastically different ways, the first as the final poem of Eliot's *Collected Poems 1909-1935* and the second as the first poem of *Four Quartets* (1944), Middleton makes the intriguing claim that in its final published form:

Burnt Norton is made to stand for a modernist temporal poetics which *Four Quartets* decisively bring to an end...The new position of *Burnt Norton* transformed it: the three serial poems that now followed it incrementally erased its meaning, calling forth melancholic ghosts of gender and desire in the process.

(83)

Primarily because of World War II, Middleton argues that the Eliot's conception of his poetry changed and the ideology that originally informed *Burnt Norton* had to be subordinated or subsumed by a poetics that valorized the masculinity of the past, even while acknowledging that it was lost. Part of this emerges through his analysis of the ghost, of which he offers a Freudian reading. Freud claimed that the ego was formed out of the inability to let go of lost love objects; based upon this, Middleton claims that the ego of the poet could accurately be described as a "‘compound ghost’ of former loves" (97).¹³ He goes on to assert that the ghost of *Little Gidding* can consequently be read as a compilation of lost homoerotic objects that Eliot is seeking to regain because of the necessary idealization of masculinity, even while he attempts to shun the feminizing effects of such an attempt (99). The ghost is thus "compound" and "familiar," being part of the poet's own ego and composed of rejected masculine love objects, including Dante, Yeats, Verdenal, and other ghosts of masculinity that proceed it in the poem (100).

III. The Ordering of Sexuality: "Desire itself is movement / Not in itself desirable"

Middleton and Miller's essays, though they differ in both methodology and conclusion, serve as an excellent starting point for an examination of sexuality in *Four Quartets*, as they introduce and explore what is almost invariably ignored, dismissed, or taken for granted: *Four Quartets* is a poem that subtly revolves around questions of gender and desire. It is an extension of ideas originally explored in *The Waste Land*, not a repetition and not entirely a contradiction. Though in a much different sense than suggested by Rutler, Eliot *is* like the scriptural lover from Song of Songs, but the window outside of which he sings is the window to his own soul, which he hopes to reach and make peace with, in and through the poem. While it is a mediation, even perhaps an instance of almost monastic contemplation, it is also, and at its essence, a confession, not simply to the public, but also to the self of the poet. The poem is, to borrow from the title of

Lyndall Gordon's recent biography of Eliot, the confession of an "imperfect life," though it is also the assertion of hope and meaning.

Consequently, to read *Four Quartets* as a confident declaration of, or melancholic elegy for, a masculine patriarchal poetics, would be to miss Eliot's journey to confront and understand the place of sexuality in the life of the modernist individual; yet this has been the most common critical practice.¹⁴ Laurie MacDiarmid explains this tendency: "We identify ourselves, as viewers and postmodern readers, with the women damaged by Eliot's ambitions for purity and sainthood— seeing the culture as wounded, in turn, by Eliot's disdain, sanctimonious withdrawal and implied condemnation" (xxiii). There is, of course, value in our perspective, in our distance, which enables us to understand the faults of the man and their manifestations in his work. Yet with this, there comes a tendency to take sides and establish definite and mutually exclusive categories with regard to Eliot.¹⁵ As a result, the function of the critic changes, it is not longer to understand, analyze, and evaluate, but to judge and categorize (and consequently to be categorized.) There is a demand for definitive judgment: Eliot was a misogynist, a homophobe, a repressed homosexual, a chauvinist, and/or a masochist acting under the rather transparent guise of religion or he was none of these things and must be defended at all costs (or the issue is conveniently disregarded). Critics, consequently, must be either "for Eliot" or "against Eliot" in all that they write. That this framework of interpretation has been erected is obviously problematic and it obscures our understanding of Eliot and of his poetry, in this case, sexuality in *Four Quartets*.

In attempting to employ a more balanced approach, we find that beyond the assertions of Middleton and Miller, Eliot's presentation of sexuality (masculinity, femininity, and desire) in *Four Quartets* emerges from his struggle with language and is closely tied with his conversion to

Christianity. While assertions of misogyny and homophobia stemming from and relating directly to his biography have some value in the explication of *Four Quartets*, the implications of Eliot's treatment of sexuality, while perhaps less colored by tabloid-like appeal ("T.S. Eliot was Gay!") extend much deeper into the underpinnings of language and the self. In *Four Quartets*, we find Eliot moving beyond *The Waste Land*, moving beyond the violent indulgence of the young man carbuncular and beyond the ascetic ideals of Buddha and Augustine. He recognizes that denial, though it appears to be the opposite of obsession, is really simply a different mask that obsession wears, as even in its negation, desire remains the fixation of the individual. We can see the progression of *Four Quartets* in the way that *The Waste Land*'s sterile fire of sexual desire is not quenched, embraced, or rejected, but transformed into the flames of Purgatorial cleansing and Pentecostal renewal. The poem is a mediation on this re-vision of sexuality, a struggle with the acceptance of it, and a working out of its implications. For some, doubtless, this movement is problematic, as it is undeniably informed by Eliot's conversion to Christianity, to an ideology of order, to a teleological universe. This can also be traced in Eliot's prose writings, particularly "The Idea of a Christian Society" and "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture," which he wrote at while he was composing *Four Quartets*, and contain a similar effort to impose a Christian order on the world.¹⁶

Because of this, *Four Quartets*, though critics have failed to recognize it, is potentially more misogynistic than *The Waste Land*. In the poem, Eliot seeks to attain a transcendental signifier (the phallus, the Word); his search is undoubtedly informed by a phallogocentric ideology and is predicated upon the acceptance of a unified self and rigid demarcations of gender and sexuality. Yet whether charges of misogyny can be legitimately be leveled against him is not clear, as Eliot repeatedly acknowledges the shortcomings of the construction he is attempting

to impose. That is, he recognizes the presence and subversive power of the semiotic, though it frustrates him and he endeavors to subject it, definitively, to the order of a transcendental signifier. *Four Quartets* is a manifestation of Eliot's desire for the Symbolic, which, as Judith Butler explains it, "structures the world by suppressing multiple meanings (which always recall the libidinal multiplicity which characterized the primary relation to the maternal body) and instating univocal and discrete meanings in their place" (101). However, in order to do this, Eliot is forced to take a Kierkegaardian leap to faith, as he cannot find any other way to order his desires and is unwilling to accept a reality without meaning.

Ultimately, in this inquiry, it is necessary to distinguish between the treatment of belief and sexuality in the poem, even while acknowledging that they are related. This is because Eliot, while authentically embracing a Christian worldview, has difficulty accepting a conception of sexuality that is constructed; yet he knows that this is necessary, as the fundamental metaphors of his faith revolve around the hegemony of heterosexuality, the proper sexual union of male and female. This study is primarily an examination of gender and sexuality in *Four Quartets*; the full implications and influence of Eliot's faith, both positive and problematic, are the subject for some other study.

IV. A Re-Vision of *The Waste Land*: "Ridiculous the waste sad time"

The connection between *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets* is first suggested in their parallel five-section structure, which Eliot retains throughout each of the *Four Quartets*. Thematically, the latter poem's explicit reevaluation of *The Waste Land* is seen primarily, though not exclusively, in *Burnt Norton*. There, key moments from the earlier poem are echoed, but their import differs considerably. The chaos, fragmentation, and sterility, all originating in sexuality, that functioned as method and meaning in *The Waste Land*, while still present at least

in suggestion, are no longer the central focus. They are replaced by the almost inextricable pairing of guilt and desire, evoked in the abstraction of the poem's opening meditation on the permanency of choices: "If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable" (4-5). This is not to say that the disparate nature of reality and sexuality depicted in *The Waste Land* is disregarded or contradicted; rather, Eliot moves beyond the common modernist observation of widespread spiritual/sexual malaise and examines the internal struggle of the individual to come to terms with his or her own sexual identity and as a consequence, the surrounding world. However, the extension of *The Waste Land* goes beyond a more nuanced expression of the problem; Eliot also suggests a solution. In *Burnt Norton*, this is seen in the glimpses of order and the momentary possibility of transcendence. Neither order nor transcendence are permanent, but they are the first sources of wholeness that Eliot provides to the fragmented sexuality of the self.

The first and most significant of these parallels between the poems is the garden scene, which occurs in Section I of both. Immediately, the garden recalls Eden and with it, the pre- and post-lapsarian worlds, the Fall, guilt, suffering, and the need for redemption. In *The Waste Land*, the scene is introduced with the ominous words, "I will show you fear in a handful of dust" (30) followed by a brief excerpt from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, music and the memory of the scene being intimately connected.¹⁷ The actual passage involves a crisis of gender identity and an inquiry into the nature of sexuality. It is important, therefore, to note that throughout the scene, the gender of both characters can be read as male or female, creating an interpretive dissonance between the expected and the possible, a fundamental trope found throughout the poem.¹⁸

The stanza begins with a disembodied voice speaking: "'You gave me hyacinths first a year ago; / They called me the hyacinth girl'" (35-36). This traditional act of heterosexual

courtship, however, did not reach its expected consummation. Recalling the memory that will never leave him, the giver of the hyacinth's then provides the rest of the encounter:

–Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence (37-41)

Desire is thus subverted. It is undermined by the impotence of the second speaker, an impotence that is both verbal and sexual; this is the Fall, or at least a consequence of it.¹⁹ The significance of this scene to the poem, Pondrom argues, is far-reaching:

It becomes a founding site of one of the controlling conceits of the poem, the wastage of human erotic love, simultaneously figuring the absence of connection with a Divine Love; the interruption of desire in language; deferral of union of signifier and signified; and the failure of consciousness to be coterminous with its object. (429)

The origin of the pervasive impotence and sterility of the poem is the inability to impose order, to unite word and meaning, desire and its object. Traditional attempts to bring order by imposing a rigid binary conception of sexuality only serve to exacerbate and perpetuate the problem. The scene enacts these conventional gender roles, even while it subverts them by providing alternative reading that acknowledge the performative nature of gender.

The crisis of desire is followed by an evocation of the “heart of light,” which is ambiguous in both function and nature; the mystifying and perhaps mystical image appears again in *Four Quartets*. Here, there is the suggestion that it is the source of the speaker's blindness,

the catalyst for inaction. Both cast onto the speaker from without and emanating from within, the light simultaneously suggests the scrutinizing gaze of society and the sexual nature of the speaker, which is fundamentally at odds with society's reductive and ineffective constructs of identity. Or, rather than being directly at odds with society, it is indifferent, and like the light, unknowable. Thus, at the core, the crux, the heart of the passage is the inability of the speaker to comprehend his/her own fragmented identity or any means of unifying it. The scene then concludes with another line from Wagner's opera.

Music also frames the garden encounter in *Burnt Norton*, as the song of the thrush lures the narrator into the garden and then bids him, we shall assume he is a male, to go. As with the interaction in the hyacinth garden, entry into this garden is an entry to memory and speculation, into "what might have been and what has been," into guilt and desire. Here, however, the narrator is alone, surrounded only by the ghosts of his memories and in this solitude, he has a mystical experience:

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 (34-37)

With the exception of the companion, the primary elements of the earlier scene remain: the water, the flowers, the light, and later the loss. The barren description of the concrete rim of the drained pool recalls the sterility of *The Waste Land*, perhaps even the failed union of the earlier garden encounter, but to a much different end. The "heart of light," blinding, disabling, castrating in the previous encounter, now brings momentary life, peace, or transcendence, even

though the speaker acknowledges the transitory and even false nature of the experience: “A cloud passed, and the pool was empty” (39).

While Pondrom reads the “heart of light” in *The Waste Land*, as “the agonizing light of the expectation of masculine dominance”(428), we cannot apply this reading to the passage in *Burnt Norton*, for this scene differs from its predecessor precisely in that there is no expectation. The word “heart” carries with it a range of physical and spiritual connotations. As “heart” is derived from the Latin, “cor,” it is suggestive of “core,” or “the center,” a term which will be found repeatedly in *Burnt Norton* (*Oxford English Dictionary*).²⁰ “Heart” is also a very physical word, beyond the bodily organ, it is the “seat of courage,” an important attribute of masculinity in the poem. However, coupled with this is the understanding that it is “the seat of love or affection.”

These readings, not quite mutually exclusive, are further complicated by the spiritual suggestion of the phrase, “heart of light.” While it may be possible to read this as an allusion to the Sacred Heart of Christ, a more helpful textual link would be to either the Transfiguration or the Conversion of Paul.²¹ Both present the momentary and blinding light of the divine that brings about new vision of the world.²² Additionally, the “heart of light” evokes the prologue to the Gospel of John: “And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not” (1:4). While the metaphorically darkened world of *The Waste Land* failed to comprehend the light, the older Eliot has at least a momentary glimpse of its meaning. In all three scriptural cases, the light is clearly linked to the logos, the eternal Word, in Christian terms, to Christ. The suggestive force of the phrase, “heart of light,” in all facets, transports us to the internal world of the narrator, to the center of his being, to his subjective experience of the world, which is also where the garden encounter concludes in *The Waste Land*. Therefore, Eliot’s re-envisioning of

the passage in the hyacinth garden initially seems to differ primarily in tone; the subject matter is more or less the same.

However, it is in the final lines of this first section of *Burnt Norton* that the implications of Eliot's revision of the garden become clearer. The thrush, who led the speaker into the garden, again guides him: "Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind / Cannot bear very much reality" (42-43). Initially, it would seem that the mystical occurrence in the garden is the reality of which the bird speaks; it is fleetingly experienced by the speaker, who must leave it. Yet there is little textual or logical support for this rendering and the nature of the phrasing leaves the precise referent of the words ambiguous. We find that the scene reads more cogently when we assume that it is not the mystical garden that is real, but rather the actual garden: dismal, dry, and empty as it may be. The moment of transcendence, when light briefly *appears* to fill up the pool, is initiated by the "deception of the thrush" (22). It is in this masking of reality, this construct, this illusion, that the speaker finds some comfort from the reality that he cannot bear. This, then, explains the positive tone in the later poem: while the experience in both poems is quite similar, it is in *Burnt Norton* that the speaker seeks comfort or relief in a pattern that he imposes on the fragmented world. In *The Waste Land*, the speaker dwells upon reality, its frighteningly disjointed nature, and cannot bear it; the imposition of the pattern by the latter protagonist rectifies the earlier crisis, which undoubtedly originated in sexuality and desire. Yet, as we shall see, the imposition of this pattern with regard to sexuality, becomes problematic in its implications.

V. Re-envisioning Section IV: "After the kingfisher's wing"

The second passage in *Burnt Norton* where an explicit re-vision of *The Waste Land* takes place is Section IV, and again, the many similarities only serve to highlight the differences. On a

structural level, the passages are linked, in that they have the same number of lines, ten, and both stand out as by far the shortest of their respective poems. “Death by Water” is one of *The Waste Land*’s most important passages. As nearly all critics discussing it are compelled to note: when Eliot responded to Pound’s considerable excisions from the draft version by asking if he should cut section IV altogether, Pound responded emphatically, “I DO advise keeping Phlebas. In fact, I more’n advise it. Phlebas is an integral part of the poem; the card park introduces him, the drowned phoen. Sailor, and he is needed ABSolootly where he is. Must stay in” (*Letters* 505). The significance of the passage duly noted, the section’s relationship to sexuality must be explored, as well as the way in which Eliot returned to these ideas in *Four Quartets*.

On a basic level, and as the title indicates, “Death by Water” deals with the living death of Phlebas the Phoenician sailor, beneath the surface of the sea. This serves as the thematic link between the sections, as death is also central to section IV in *Four Quartets*, though it lacks a particular named protagonist. In “Death by Water,” the nature of death is quite complex. More than simply the decomposition of the body, though certainly encompassing this, it depicts a death of desire and distinctions. In the section’s brief length, Eliot blurs the lines between death and life and age and youth, while embracing the conflicting binaries of profit and loss, Gentile and Jew, and even the rising and falling of the waves. The breakdown of distinctions is undoubtedly, though not explicitly, linked to sexuality, as the relationship between Phlebas and the androgynous hyacinth girl conveys the indefinable nature of sexuality.²³

It is also important to recognize the placement of “Death by Water,” following the violent and frustrated sexuality of *The Waste Land*’s central and longest section, “The Fire Sermon.” While standing in stark opposition to the enflamed sexuality of its predecessor, “Death By Water” does not offer hope, merely an alternative route to the same destination. “The Fire

Sermon” depicts the sexuality of the modern world as Eliot sees it; it is characterized by rape and violation, seduction and death; it does not and cannot result in a meaningful union. Connections to Eliot’s failed marriage, in this regard, have been numerous. The only alternative the young Eliot sees, which both accepts the multiple and fragmented nature of sexuality and is unmarred by violence and confusion, is a death to the self and desire, like the asceticism of the Buddha and Augustine, which is embodied in the living death of Phlebas.

The older Eliot, however, finds his earlier position untenable. Immediately prior to the revision of “Death by Water” in section IV of *Four Quartets*, Eliot describes a state similar to that of Phlebas: “Desiccation of the world of sense, / Evacuation of the world of fancy, / Inoperancy of the world of spirit” (199-121). He then goes on to demonstrate the problematic nature of this condition, reasoning that the necessary end of those who practice it is the same as that of those who indulge their appetites, as in “The Fire Sermon”:

This is the one way, and the other
 Is the same, not in movement
 But abstention from movement; while the world moves
 In appetency, on its metallated ways” (122-125).

Thus Eliot rejects indulgence and asceticism and is forced to provide some new and preferable alternative; this is done in Section IV, where again his mediations bring us to stillness, order, and light.

The opening lines of the section convey the foreboding presence and passage of time: “Time and the bell have buried the day, / The black cloud carries the sun away” (127-128). The introduction of rhyme, which is maintained throughout the short passage, already serves to differentiate the section from its sprawling, unrhymed predecessor. As in “Death by Water, here,

the end to which time inevitably leads is death, evoked in the “burial” of time, and by association and the inclusive use of “us,” the speaker and all humanity. Still paralleling the plight of Phlebas, what follows is a mediation on the position and plight of a corpse, beneath the flowering world: “Will the sunflower turn to us, will the clematis / Stray down, bend to us; tendril and spray / Clutch and cling?” (129-132). While the reference to the sunflower provides an initially positive tone, it rapidly becomes darker, culminating in the image of a body, dead and buried, being wrapped in the roots of a yew tree, the traditional tree of English cemeteries: “Chill / Fingers of yew be curled / Down on us” (132-134).²⁴ The question raised is whether death is the only certainty, the only source of meaning.

The answer, which immediately follows, is short and certain, though enigmatic: “After the kingfisher’s wing / Has answered light to light, and is silent, the light is still / At the still point of the turning world” (134-136). The bird could be read as an allusion to the Holy Spirit, often depicted as a dove, or to “The Windhover” of Gerard Manley Hopkins; the reflection of its wing, “light to light,” supplies a suggestion of the supernatural or divine. However, there is another, more relevant reference. The kingfisher clearly recalls the wounded Fisher King of Arthurian lore who appears in *The Waste Land*, sitting “upon the shore / Fishing, with the arid plain behind” (423-424); in the notes to the poem, Eliot indicates the significance of the character. In the myth, the king is wounded and impotent, his sterility being a source of the barrenness of the land. If the kingfisher is to be linked to the Fisher King, it is unclear whether it represents the king restored or still impaired. Regardless of how the bird is interpreted, the weight of the passage follows the reference, when Eliot returns to the light first encountered in the garden. While the Fisher King may be healed or irreparably maimed, I would suggest that the latter reads more cogently, Eliot states the light will persist, even after the broken king is

silent and gone. That the light is “still,” is significant and is emphasized by its placement at the end of the line; it suggests both permanency and motionlessness, characteristics that would define a transcendental signifier. Consequently, if we are to accept that the light is a representation of the transcendental signifier, the logos or phallus, Christ, then it is clear that Eliot is asserting a different certainty in the face of death. Existing beyond and unaffected by the presence of the wounded Fisher King (a victim of sexual fragmentation, like the man in the hyacinth garden), the light abides and orders. In this revision of “Death by Water,” Eliot acknowledges the dissolution of Phlebas and the destruction of the Fisher King as realities, but looks to the light of the earlier experience as a possible source of transcendent order.

VI. Acknowledgment of Imperfection and the Semiotic: “I do not know much about gods”

Contrary to Middleton’s argument that *Burnt Norton* functions effectively as an end or culmination to Eliot’s earlier work, only to have its meaning gradually erased by the subsequent three poems, we see that it is in that first poem of *Four Quartets* that Eliot begins to articulate his movement away from *The Waste Land*; it is an incomplete and tentative move beyond the earlier poems, always marked by doubt. In it, the search for meaning and positing of a transcendental signifier, though experienced only momentarily, indicate that *Burnt Norton* is not so much a capstone, but a foundation. The poem is certainly not a decisive and definitive declaration of the triumph of order and conquering of desire. Eliot’s doubts are as integral to the poem as his attempts to impose a pattern and meaning; they make it clear that Eliot is not denying or contradicting his earlier observations about reality, but attempting to build upon them. That is, *Four Quartets* never denies the fragmentation of the self and it recurs, often to the chagrin of the speaker, who nevertheless, accepts it. As Eliot repeatedly returns to the reality he articulated in

The Waste Land, the fragmentation of the self and language, he questions the ability to impose order and acknowledges the subversive power of sexuality to escape artificial constructions.

Eliot's doubts about the possibility of his endeavor begin at the outset of the poem where he states that if time cannot be ordered, that is, if it is eternally present, then "all time is unredeemable" (5). The meditation that follows suggests a multiplicity of selves existing in the mind of the individual, comprised of "what might have been" (9). Middleton's Freudian reading of the compound ghost of *Little Gidding* is applicable here, as Eliot attempt to understand the splits in himself: "In *The Ego and the Id* (1923) [Freud] argues that the adult ego is the accretive outcome of melancholic refusals to admit the loss of sexual object" (97). In Eliot's case, this might be Emily Hale, Jean Verdenal, and Vivienne. Middleton further explains how this process is necessary, particularly for the artist:

Character is formed by the unmourned relationships and libidinal orientations making the ego a 'compound ghost' of former loves. Freud understands this as the necessary foundation of sublimation on which the creativity and sociality which help constitute civilization actually rest, because the ego desexualizes libidinal energy by making itself 'the sole love-object.' (97)

While this explains the formation of Eliot's ego, its roots in sexuality, its fragmentation stemming from the denial of desire, Eliot cannot accept these ghosts whose "footfalls echo in the memory" (11). The presence of these former loves is not distinct from Eliot's ego and in fact serves to create other selves, within the poet; these ghosts are the possible selves of Eliot, had he pursued different love-object choices.

The poem begins with the acknowledgement of this multiplicity and even expresses hesitancy at attempting to bring order to it: "But to what purpose / Disturbing the dust on a bowl

of rose-leaves / I do know not” (15-17). In Section II of *East Coker*, again Eliot expresses considerable doubt about the possibility of effectively imposing a pattern on the world. This begins with a lengthy reflection in elevated language, occasionally rhymed; its grandiose symbolism beginning with the query, “What is the late November doing / With the disturbance of the spring” (51-52) and culminating thunderously:

Comets weep and Leonids fly
 Hunt the heavens and the plains
 Whirled in a vortex that shall bring
 The world to that destructive fire
 Which burns before the ice cap reigns. (63-67)

There is nothing like this in *The Waste Land*; this exemplifies the pattern, order, and construction of meaning. However, rather than embracing this as we might expect, Eliot immediately dismisses it: “That was a way of putting it – not very satisfactory: / A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion, / Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings” (68-71). What we must understand here is that the attempt to order language is the attempt to order desire; to control meaning is to control sexuality.

This becomes even clearer in Section V of *East Coker*, which begins with a statement of the speaker’s present condition:

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years–
 Twenty years largely wasted, the years of *l’entre deux guerres*
 Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
 Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure (72-75)

The speaker believes that he cannot master his craft; he cannot master himself. The opening line obviously suggests the beginning of Dante's *Divine Comedy* where he, too, finds himself at the middle of his journey, uncertain of how to proceed. Here, the speaker looks back on his work, to his use of language, to his life, and finds it all to be a waste; his position akin to that expressed at the opening of *The Waste Land*, knowing only "a heap of broken images" (22). His doubt about the ability to ever adequately impose order stems, in part, from the simple fact that he has tried and failed for twenty years.²⁵ Again, it recalls *The Waste Land*, where upon realizing he has been unable to bring his lands to order, the Fisher King makes the despairing pronouncement: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" (430). Likewise, the speaker of *East Coker* only finds fragmentation and waste in his creations, in himself. He goes on to explain this further, explicitly linking his inability to master language with his inability to master himself:

And so each venture
 Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
 With shabby equipment always deteriorating
 In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
 Undisciplined squads of emotion. (178-182)

Eliot recognizes that, because he is fundamentally sexually split and has no unified identity, libidinal desires continually emerge, disrupt, and subvert the singularity of meaning for which he longs. He acknowledges his persistent failure to order his sexuality, but then speculates that success in his endeavor may not be possible: "But perhaps neither gain nor loss. / For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business" (88-89). The poem ends with this speculation reaffirmed but not further explored; will the continual effort to reach "a further union, a deeper

communion” (206), ever meet with success? What is the impetus for this continual trying? Eliot does reach an answer to these questions, but does not provide it here.

Eliot resumes his wrestling with the possibility of imposing order in *The Dry Salvages*, again both complicating and clarifying his position. The poem’s governing metaphor is water, which is equated with sexuality and desire: fluid, moving, unorderable. Constructions and attempts to bring order or master this force are equated with those who try to tame the river or to master the sea. This struggle, and the ultimately illusory nature of control, is clearly seen in the opening section of the poem. Desire, like the powerful brown river, is “sullen, untamed, intractable” (2); it is seen as “useful, untrustworthy” (4), and then “only a problem confronting the builder of bridges” (5). That is, it is a problem only to those who attempt to control it, to construct a system that orders and uses it. The irrepressibility of desire and sexuality, nevertheless, persists beyond these attempts, though it goes ignored:

The problem, once solved, the brown god is almost forgotten

By the dwellers in cities – ever, however, implacable,

Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder

Of what men choose to forget. Unhonored, unpropitiated

By worshippers of the machine, but waiting, watching and waiting. (6-10)

This characterization of desire does not allow for any complete control; like the semiotic, or perhaps corresponding to it, this desire cannot be completely conquered. Eliot acknowledges the pervasive presence of false constructions of order, which, while accepted by the masses, are ultimately doomed to failure; the image of a surge of desire, like a wave or flood, powerfully conveys Eliot’s conception of this force which he cannot master.

Significantly, Eliot explicitly links this desire to infancy, as its “rhythm was present in the nursery bedroom” (11). While this suggests a tie to psychoanalysis, the connection becomes even clearer when Eliot incorporates the sea, a frequent image of the maternal. His descriptions of the sea parallel quite closely with an eternal presence of the mother in the subconscious: “The sea is all about us” (15); “The sea has many voices / Many gods and many voices” (24-25); the time of the sea is “time not our time... a time / Older than the time of chronometers” (37-38). Kristeva situates the semiotic in this same position: infancy, prior to the ordering of time and consciousness, stemming from the mother: “At the same time instinctual and maternal, semiotic processes prepare the future speaker for entrance into meaning and signification (the symbolic)” (136). However, the symbolic is antagonistic to the semiotic: “Language as a symbolic function constitutes itself at the cost of repressing instinctual drive and continuous relation to the mother” (136). One of the clearest images of this struggle is actually found earlier in the poem, in Section V of *Burnt Norton*:

Shrieking voices

Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering,

Always assail them. The Word in the desert

Is most attacked by voices of temptation. (153-156)

The Word, the logos, the phallus, the law of the father, the Lacanian transcendental signifier, the symbolic, thus must suppress the multiplicity of voices and meaning, must repress the instinctual drives, must silence the semiotic. Consequently, we can see how Eliot’s struggle with language and desire is due to the way in which poetic language does not act in accordance with the symbolic, instead “reactivating this repressed instinctual maternal element” (136). *The Dry Salvages* revolves around Eliot’s insistence that the semiotic disrupts the meaning and certainty

he seeks. The semiotic undermines the teleological, causing Eliot to state that, within that framework, it is impossible to imagine “a future that is not liable / Like the past, to have no destination” (71-72).

VII. The Ordering of His Doubts: “The one discharge from sin and error”

The Dry Salvages also contain Eliot’s initial movement toward ordering or at least silencing the semiotic, which, in turn, leads toward his final leap to a transcendental signifier in *Little Gidding*. The semiotic is rooted in the maternal, and Eliot, being a Christian, makes the logical step to Mary, the mother of Christ. This is done initially in Section 2, which begins, in highly ordered stanzas, by asking if there is an end (which can be read as “conclusion” or as “ordered purpose”) to suffering and death, stating that the prayer of death is “the unprayerable / Prayer at the calamitous annunciation” (53-54). The answer to this question comes in the last of the ordered stanzas, which begins with the despairing: “There is no end of it, the voiceless wailing” (79). However, the tone then changes slightly, as Eliot does not entirely eliminate hope: “Only the hardly, barely prayable / Prayer of the one Annunciation” (83-84). This allusion to the announcement that Mary would conceive and bring Christ, the logos, into the world, is further developed in Section IV, which is an invocation to Mary: “Lady, whose shrine stands on the promontory, / Pray for all of those who are in ships” (169-170).

This initial request for Mary to bring order, or at least protection, to those who attempt to master the sea, is followed by a dramatic shift. Eliot, without warning, carries out his most significant move in subordinating the semiotic to the symbolic; again invoking Mary, he uses the title, “Figlia del tuo figlio” (177). The Italian translated reads: “Daughter of your son.” The implications of this are far reaching, and should be fairly obvious. Mary, the representative maternal figure and consequently directly tied to desire and the semiotic, is not cast as the

mother of the Word, but as daughter. The logos, the phallus, is given precedence, and the anteriority of the maternal is denied. Mary is the maternal, ordered by the phallus. It is this subjection that makes the affirmation of a transcendental signifier possible and Eliot is quick to do this.

Section V begins with a lengthy cataloguing of the ways in which humanity attempts to reach meaning; many are related to the occult, though Eliot also alludes to psychotherapy: “Dissect / The recurrent image into pre-conscious terrors— / To explore the womb, or tomb, or dreams” (193-194). The falsity of these constructions is understood. It is at this point that Eliot declares his leap to faith, his aspiration for sanctity: “But to apprehend / The point of intersection of the timeless / With time, is an occupation for the saint” (200-202). His doubts are acknowledged, but only insofar as they serve to reveal his faith, he states:

These are only hints and guesses,

Hints followed by guesses; and the rest

Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.

The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation. (212-215)

The passage indicates that there is no certainty in Eliot’s choice to embrace the Incarnation, the Word, his transcendental signifier, “the impossible union” (216). This uncertainty, which characterizes his embrace of the ordering Word, is precipitated largely by his previous idealization of the Annunciation. This movement is problematic, marked by absurdity and fraught with paradox. What, if any, basis can we find for it?

It is helpful, first to contrast Eliot’s inquiry into meaning and his response with that of Derrida, as their difference (no pun intended) is striking.²⁶ Borrowing the terms from Lévi-Strauss, Derrida writes of the need for the *bricoleur* to employ *bricolage*, that is, for the critic (or

author), acknowledging that the framework of language within which he is trapped is flawed, nevertheless to use “the means at hand” to issue a critique of ideology. He goes on to explain the opposite of his position, which closely parallels that of Eliot:

The engineer, whom Lévi-Strauss opposes to the *bricoleur*, should be the one to construct the totality of his language, syntax, and lexicon. In this sense, the engineer is a myth. A subject who supposedly would be the absolute origin of his own discourse and supposedly would construct it “out of nothing,” “out of cloth,” would be the creator of the verb itself. (285)

In accepting and embracing the authority and presence of the Word, Eliot affirms the existence of the engineer, disavowing the need for *bricolage*, declaring the possibility of reaching and expressing meaning in and through language, thus ordering desire and sexuality. Derrida declares what becomes apparent in reading Eliot: “The notion of the engineer who supposedly breaks with all forms of *bricolage* is therefore a theological idea” (285). We see that Derrida acknowledges that the theological movement of Eliot as a possible response which would bring order to reality, but he dismisses it as mythopoetic. Eliot conceives of the situation in a similar manner, but his response, affirming the opposite of Derrida, is because he finds a basis for accepting theology.

Eliot provides good reason for using Kierkegaard’s conception of the “leap to faith” as the basis for understanding his own movement to theology and teleology.²⁷ Faith is the central topic of the Danish philosopher’s work, *Fear and Trembling*; it revolves around Kierkegaard’s examination of the faith of Abraham, specifically, the passage in which he is ordered by God to sacrifice his only son Isaac.²⁸ Kierkegaard’s articulation of the meaning of faith stems from his belief that most do not understand the anguish that is meant by the term, they are content with

knowing the story, but they do not allow it to disquiet their spirits. Faith, he argues, is necessarily absurd, paradoxical, and never mastered (for certainty does away with the need for faith). In contrast with the misguided conceptions of faith he finds in his contemporaries, Kierkegaard explains how it was viewed in the past:

Faith was a task for a whole lifetime, not a skill thought to be acquired in either days or weeks. When the old campaigner... kept his faith, his heart was still young enough not to have forgotten the fear and trembling that had disciplined his youth and which, although a grown man mastered it, no man altogether outgrows.

(42)

It is a very similar realization that Eliot touches upon in the closing section of *East Coker*, though his recognition of it does not necessarily entail an embrace of it:

As we grow older
The world become stranger, the pattern more complicated
Of dead and living. Not the intense moment
Isolated, with no before and after,
But a lifetime burning in every moment. (190-194)

The “lifetime of burning in every moment” corresponds quite directly to the “fear and trembling” of Kierkegaard, the way in which faith is a state of being, recognized more clearly by those who have lived long enough to see this complication in their lives. Further explaining the absurdity and paradox that define faith and make it impossible ever to move fully beyond faith, Kierkegaard studies Abraham, held as an exemplar of faith by Paul, in Romans²⁹:

All along he had faith, he believed that God would not demand Isaac of him,
while still he was willing to offer him up if that was indeed what was demanded.

He believed on the strength of the absurd, for there could be no question of human calculation, and it was indeed absurd that God who demanded this of him should in the next instant withdraw the demand. (65)

The absurdity and paradox of belief are repeatedly emphasized in the work and form the foundation of Kierkegaard's conception of faith; without them, faith is not itself, is not valid, cannot justify the actions of the individual.³⁰

Providing a strong link to Eliot's own movement toward and justification of taking this "leap to faith," Kierkegaard employs the Annunciation and the *fiat* of Mary as another example of authentic faith: "She needs no worldly admiration, as little as Abraham needs our tears, for she was no heroine and he no hero, but both of them became greater than that, not by any means by being relieved of the distress, the agony, and the paradox, but because of these" (94). Eliot's movement consciously follows this pattern; he places his faith in the ordering power of a transcendental signifier, even while all he can see in the world around him is the fragmentation of identity and the irrepressibility of desire, the constant disruption of the semiotic. While we may find this movement suspect, it is necessary to understand that his faith must be based upon "hints and guesses," as certainty precludes the need for faith; it is in his renunciation of certainty and leaping toward faith that he finds the certainty for which he longs. This is the paradox of his position, a position we are not bound to accept, but which explains how Eliot can recognize the semiotic, the fragmentation of the self, the arbitrary nature of language, while still insisting upon the possibility and even necessity of meaning.

Little Gidding, marked by a certainty of tone that is not as apparent in the preceding poems, is largely informed by the movement that Eliot makes at the conclusion of *The Dry Salvages*. He insists upon the paradox of faith again, its necessary foundation on uncertainty but

culmination in meaning: “And what you thought you came for / Is only a shell, a husk of meaning / From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled” (30-32). He again states that regardless of how this point is reached, “It would always be the same: you would have to put off / sense and notion. You are not here to verify” (42-43). The paradox enables his movement beyond the frustration and fragmentation of the temporal, depicted as air, earth, water, and fire. As his certainty swells, Eliot is forced into a final confrontation with himself and his desire.

At the “uncertain hour,” recalling the “violet hour” at which Tiresias enters *The Waste Land*, while on his night patrol, Eliot encounters the “compound ghost.”³¹ We might, to some extent, accept Middleton’s postulation that the “familiar compound ghost,” is an accretion of former and rejected love-object choices (97). It is indeed Eliot approaching the fragmentation of himself, his “other selves,” which were introduced with frustration at the beginning of *Burnt Norton*. However, this encounter is not a relapse into Eliot’s earlier struggles to order desire. Rather, the scene is one of reconciliation, marked not by a multiplicity of meanings, but by a “union, a deeper communion.” His desires, questions of gender, sexuality, and language, no longer serve to subvert his identity; he finds his multiple selves “in concord at this intersection time” (105). His multiplicity has been silenced, ordered by his “leap to faith” and embrace of a transcendental signifier; the words of the ghost not only sound like those of Eliot, they actually are, as he “assumed a double part” (97).

The scene, which we might expect to be marked by an unsettling schizophrenia, instead conveys the unity of Eliot’s person. The words of the ghost confirm the ordering of desires. The three “gifts reserved for age” which he reveals to Eliot, or rather, Eliot himself acknowledges, are all connected to the struggle to order sexuality. The first is “the cold friction of expiring sense” (131); the second is “the conscious impotence of rage” (135); the last is “the rending pain

of re-enactment” (138). Clearly not gifts in and of themselves, these are rather the culmination of a disordered sexuality, the only crowns which could be set upon the efforts of a fragmented life. But Eliot, ghost and self, is free of these, because he knows, as the ghost states, that he can be “restored by that refining fire” (145), ordering sexuality, like music, so that he can “move in measure, like a dancer” (146). With this, the ghost departs, leaving, or rather, becoming Eliot, who is again, or finally, unified.

The remainder of *Little Gidding* is marked by the confidence that meaning is possible, that order can be imposed, that a pattern, like a dance, can regulate and control sexuality and desire, or even transform it: “not less of love but expanding / Of love beyond desire” (157-158). The ghosts of the past, of desire, along with the fragmented Eliot of the past, are all gone, ordered beyond recognition: “See, now they vanish, / The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them, / To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern” (163-165). Eliot then turns with new eyes to the tradition of Christian mysticism: Julian of Norwich and John of the Cross. The paradoxes of John had appeared earlier in the poem, but as Kierkegaard pointed out in relation to Abraham, knowing differs considerably from believing with “fear and trembling.” However, Eliot’s paradoxical movement to meaning by the way of unmeaning (faith), now confirms John’s words: “In order to arrive at what you are not / You must go through the way in which you are not” (142-143). Likewise, Julian’s insight that “Sin is Behovely, but / All shall be well” (166-167) now resonates with Eliot’s movement from the chaos of desire to the order of meaning. The transformative power of Eliot’s embrace of a transcendental signifier thus prompts the poem’s most famous lines:

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. (239-242)

The confidence of this statement, the certainty of the ability to “know,” marks the end of the journey. The poem’s final lines speak of the triumphant ordering of desire:

All manner of thing shall be well

When the tongues of flame are in-folded

Into the crown knot of fire

And the fire and the rose are one. (255-259)

Multiplicity, dissent, the semiotic, sexuality, the fragmented self, all find their end in the resounding unity of the poem’s last word, subjected to the logos, the phallus, Christ, the poet.

In the end, we are left not with an answer, as Eliot believed, but rather a seemingly irresolvable question, informed by the central paradox of the text: Is meaning possible? *Four Quartets* is undeniably driven by phallogocentrism; it claims that meaning is found in the acceptance of a transcendental signifier that orders the chaos of reality. However, Eliot does not reject the fragmentation he found and depicted in *The Waste Land*; throughout the latter poem we see its disruptive force and constant subversion of any and all meaning. Eliot thus presents us with the paradox of two positions that are mutually exclusive, reconciling them only in his “leap to faith.” This movement, however, as Kierkegaard makes quite clear, is intensely and necessarily personal: “Faith itself cannot be mediated into the universal, for in that case it would be cancelled. Faith is this paradox, and the single individual is quite unable to make himself intelligible to anyone” (99). That is, Eliot’s claim that meaning can be attained and sexuality can be ordered, predicated upon his faith, is only Eliot’s; it cannot and must not be imposed on others. His position, like that of Abraham, must necessarily appear insane to others and only he

can know if it is authentic (Kierkegaard 103; 106). Consequently, while use of *Four Quartets* as a devotional tract are possible, they are certainly problematic.³² Contrary to Eliot, Rutler, and the like, it would be equally, perhaps even more valid to claim that the text is an example of the ultimate impossibility of attaining any definite meaning, as that which is reached by the poet is necessarily unintelligible. While the poet appears to make peace with himself, perhaps the “shantih,” the “peace which passeth understanding,” we are left with only a paradox, a question, and his word.

¹ Howard's book was originally published in 1983 by Cowley Publications. It was republished in 2003 by Forward Movement Publications. The most clearly devotional of these three is Howard's, published by Ignatius in 2006; it makes no pretense at being scholarly whatsoever. On the other hand, Kramer's, the most recent, being published by Cowley in 2007, does seek to interpose itself within critical commentary on the poem. Even so, the spiritual applicability of the poem is the guiding tenant of the work; as explained in the preface, "Eliot's *Quartets* can be an invaluable guide for quieting the mind and nourishing the soul for those on a spiritual journey" and the book is intended for those who "might be curious enough to explore how Eliot's poetry can open fresh, adaptable, ecumenical paths for deepening and exhilarating our spiritual lives" (xviii).

² The revolutionary nature of the first two texts and their widespread influence in the creation and definition of the Modernist movement is likely one reason. They are indispensable in understanding the foundations of Modernism and the characterization of sexuality in the period (by the dominant male artists and critics). Consequently, examining, criticizing, and even dismantling those poems is a priority for gender critics, while *Four Quartets* is neglected as it has no such widespread influence. A second possible reason for the failure of critics to pursue sexuality in the later poems is the conversion of Eliot, seen by many as a betrayal of his earlier work. His movement toward becoming "an Anglo-Catholic in religion, a classicist in literature, and a royalist in politics" seems quite the reversal of his earlier, avant-garde, revolutionary poetics (though there are certainly hints of it even in his earlier writings). As a consequence of these aspirations to be a spiritual, even mystical writer, gender critics have left the study of the poem to formalists, structuralists, and devotional writers. Yet it would seem that this very reason for neglect, Eliot's conversion, should be the reason that post-structuralists and gender critics examine the poem. In it they may find the subversive power of sexuality, the implications of the young Eliot's writings, or some other window to understanding the totality of Eliot and his work; flaws that they find in *The Waste Land*, "Prufrock," or Eliot's juvenilia, such as misogyny, homophobia, or an undying

adherence to phallogocentrism, may be confirmed or denied in *Four Quartets*, the culmination of his poetic career.

³ As Judith Butler states in the 1999 introduction to *Gender Trouble*, questions arising when one fears “losing one’s place in gender,” inevitably provoke “a certain crisis in ontology experienced at the level of both sexuality and language” (xi). Mapping this on to Eliot is not difficult, as there has been no shortage of questions concerning his sexuality and no doubt about his keen interest in the subject. Whether a direct biographical-to-textual connection can be made is not entirely clear, though the suggestion is strong.

⁴ Lacan describes this movement from “primordial Discord” to a unified “I”: “The *mirror stage* is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation – and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic – and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject’s entire mental development” (“The mirror” 4).

⁵ Kristeva’s articulation and definition are fairly straightforward and aid in understanding the conception of the semiotic: “This signifying disposition is not that of meaning or signification: no sign, no predication, no signified object and therefore no operating consciousness of a transcendental ego. We shall call this disposition *semiotic* (*le sémiotique*), meaning, according to the etymology of the Greek *sêmeion*, a distinctive mark, trace, index, the premonitory sign, the proof, engraved mark, imprint – in short, a *distinctiveness* admitting of an uncertain and indeterminate articulation because it does not yet refer (for young children) or not longer refers (in psychotic discourse) to a signified object for a thetic consciousness... Plato’s *Timeus* speaks of a chora, receptacle, unnamable, improbable, hybrid, anterior to naming, to the One, to the father, and consequently maternally connotated to such an extent that it merits ‘not even the rank of syllable’” (133).

⁶ Critics who have followed and greatly expanded upon this interpretation of the poem include James E. Miller, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and Carole Seymour-Jones. Of these, Miller has done the most

extensive work, including the book length study, *T.S. Eliot's Personal Waste Land*, which provides a close reading of the poem in order to confirm the thesis raised by Peter. Gilbert and Gubar use Miller's work to help situate Eliot at the forefront of what they refer to as the "war of the words," a literary battle between the sexes. Eliot represents, for them, the modern male author, frightened at the prospect of female autonomy, deeply drawn to men but outwardly repulsed at homosexuality, and obsessed with his own impotence, be it literal or literary. Seymour-Jones uses Miller, along with her own reading of the poem and its various drafts, to support her argument that Eliot destroyed his wife Vivienne, and not the other way around.

⁷ Verdenal, a medical student with an artistic bent, was a friend of Eliot, living in the same Paris pension as the poet for eleven months, between October of 1910 and September of the following year. The speculations concerning Eliot's sexuality do not arise from their correspondence; he sent a total of seven letters to Eliot, the content of which is neither shocking nor particularly suggestive of a more intimate relationship. Rather, it is two brief references made by Eliot concerning the young friend, years after their time together, that form the basis of critics' speculations about the nature of his relationship with the poet. The first is found in the dedication and epigraph of *Prufrock and Other Observations* and, translated, reads, "For Jean Verdenal... You may see / The measure of the love which warms me towards you / When I forget our insubstantiality / Treating shades as if they were solid and real (qtd. in Peter 166). The second reference indicates a similar intensity of emotion; it is from a review Eliot wrote for *The Criterion* in 1934: "I am willing to admit that my own retrospect is touched by a sentimental sunset, the memory of a friend coming across the Luxembourg Gardens in the late afternoon, waving a branch of lilac, a friend who was later (so far as I could find out) to be mixed with the mud of Gallipoli" (452). Again, the significance of the lines is their confession of powerful emotion tied to the male friend, despite their relatively brief acquaintance and the period of time elapsed since the occurrence.

⁸ Hayward was a close friend of the poet who aided him greatly in the composition of *Four Quartets* but their relationship ended somewhat bitterly when Eliot remarried.

⁹ Miller points out that the original epigraph for “Prufrock” was taken from this section, presumably associating the struggles of the poem’s eponymous narrator with homosexuality. The use of the draft, in this case, is problematic; while Miller reads the decision to change the epigraph as Eliot’s concealment of the poem’s homosexual element, and this provides the appeal of scandal), it is equally probable that the epigraph was changed because it did not fit the poem or specifically because the suggestion of homosexuality did not apply. Canto 26 is again found in “What the Thunder Said,” where, according to Miller, it links the impotence of the Fisher King with Arnaut Daniel, again suggesting that the crisis experienced involves homosexual desire.

¹⁰ Lest it be argued that these lines and the section do not refer to Canto 26 of the *Purgatorio*, Miller points out that in a letter to Hayward, Eliot admits as much, stating of the section that he wished “the effect of the whole to be Purgatorial,” and furthermore, “the reference to that Canto is tended to be explicit” (qtd. in Gardner 176).

¹¹ Eliot stated, in letters to Hayward, that Yeats was meant to be evoked in the ghost, though never explicitly identified. The poet’s admiration of the older Yeats, Miller points out, is found in a lecture given in Dublin, 1940 and can be found in the collection, *On Poetry and Poets* (Miller “Four Quartets” 232-233).

¹² Kramer provides a list of individuals that critics have argued formed some portion of the ghost, including Dante (one of the most obvious), Brunetto Latini, Shakespeare, Tourneur, Swift, and Irving Babbit. He includes Yeats, but does not mention Verdenal (153). It is intriguing that there seemingly has not been speculation that the compound nature of the ghost is in any way feminine.

¹³ He further notes that in Freud’s writings, there is a link between melancholy and elements of the uncanny, such as doubles and ghosts. A ghost can function in the same manner as a memory or identification (98).

¹⁴ While Miller and Middleton serve as extended examples of this tendency, it is more often evidenced in brief remarks and incidental comments. Seymour-Jones, in her book on Vivienne, does this several times;

in quoting lines from the poem and placing them next to events in the couple's relationship she suggests but never explains the connection. For example, with regard to Vivienne's institutionalization, she writes, "The doors of the 'home' closed behind Vivienne: *O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark...*"(571). If there is any connection between the event and the lines from *East Coker*, she never makes it clear.

¹⁵ This tendency has been commented upon by several critics. MacDiarmid comments: "It seems to be a truth universally acknowledged that any critic of Eliot must, these days, chose sides. Will you be an apologist or a judge?" (xvii). This proclivity to impose judgment, particularly harsh judgment, however, is problematic; it is a consequence of the demand that artists comply with personal and prevailing sentiments of morality and sexuality. Consequently, MacDiarmid raises the intriguing speculation: "A re-examination of our own reactions to Eliot's developing social poetic may show us much about our own reconstruction of such matters and sexuality, poetics, politics, and spirituality. Perhaps as we recoil from what we see as Eliot's corrosive 'conservatism,' we safeguard our own" (xviii). Jewel Spears Brooker, in her critique of Gilbert and Gubar's criticism of Eliot in the first volume of *No Man's Land*, claims that their reading of "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *The Waste Land*, and the poet's life, creates and perpetuates an "us versus them," male versus female logic, that is so reductive that it becomes problematic itself. She has various points of disagreement with them, but the simple root of her argument is clear: "Reliance on conflictual rhetoric and on binary logic precludes an understanding of Eliot's argument" (221).

¹⁶ A representative passage for "The Idea of a Christian Society" expresses Eliot's understanding and aim: "The Christianity expressed has been vague, the religious fervour has been a fervour for democracy. It may engender nothing better than a disguised and peculiarly sanctimonious nationalism, accelerating our progress toward paganism... To justify Christianity because it provides a foundation of morality, instead of showing the necessity of Christian morality from the truth of Christianity, is a very dangerous inversion... It is not enthusiasm, but dogma, that differentiates a Christian from a pagan society" (47).

¹⁷ Miller interestingly points out that in the seven letters from Verdenal to Eliot, he expresses his fondness for Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde* being one of the works he specifically mentions (*Letters* 24-5; 33).

¹⁸ An excellent reading of this scene forms the basis of Cyrena N. Pondrom's "T.S. Eliot: The Performativity of Gender in *The Waste Land*." She examines numerous ways in which the poem destabilizes conceptions of gender and gender normativity, using numerous textual instances to argue that "Eliot and his contemporaries recognized the performativity of gender as a source of ontological instability of the self long before it became a touchstone of post-structuralist theorizing" (438-39). She goes on to connect this to problematic moments in Eliot's life, most notably his relationship with his wife, with Verdenal, and with Emily Hale, a consistent love interest, claiming that if gender is seen as a performance, aspects of these disputes concerning his personal life become easier to reconcile.

¹⁹ This also suggests the biblical passage concerning the Tower of Babel, which follows close after the Fall, and involves the complete fragmentation and multiplication of language, resulting in chaos.

²⁰ The *OED* indicates that heart is "radically related to L. *cor, cord-*." However, the next step, linking *cor* to "core" is less certain etymologically, though it has been conjectured; regardless of actual origin, the words are linked aurally and suggestively.

²¹ *Encyclopedia Britannica* provides a helpful and concise summary of the Catholic conception of the "Sacred Heart": in the Roman Catholic Church, the physical heart of Jesus as an object of devotion. The use of Jesus' heart to symbolize his love for men is not found in the Bible but in the writings of some medieval mystics... Such images are often depicted with a wounded heart, encircled by a crown of thorns and radiating light."

²² All quotations are taken from the 1611 King James Bible, for which Eliot expressed great admiration. The Transfiguration is found in the Synoptic Gospels. The passage in Matthew 17: 1-2 is representative of the change depicted in Christ: "And adter sixe dayes, Iesus taketh Peter, Iames, Iohn his brother, and bringeth them vp into a high mountain apart, And was transfigured before them, and his face did shine as the Sunne, and his raiment was white as the light." The Conversion of Paul is found in the Acts of the

Apostles 22: 9-11, where the former persecutor of the Christians explains the encounter: “And it came to passe, that as I made my iourney, & was come nigh vnto Damascus about noone, suddenly there shone from heauen a great light round about me. And I fell vnto the ground, and heard a voice saying vnto mee, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And I answered, Who art thou, Lord? And he said vnto me, I am Iesus of Nazareth who thou persecutest. And they that were with me saw indeede the light, and were afraid; but they heard not the voice of him that spake to me. And I saide, What shall I doe, Lord?... And when I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of them that were with me.”

²³ This is far more explicit in the draft version of the poem, though Eliot’s note indicates the continuity of the male figures in the poem: “The one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples” (23). Phlebas is explicitly tied to Ferdinand by the lines uttered by Madam Sosostriis, who, after producing the tarot card of the drowned Phoenician sailor, pronounces, Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!” (48). The draft version makes the tie undisputable, when the husband in section II remarks, “I remember / The hyacinth garden. Those are pearls that were his eyes, yes!” (*Facsimile* 13).

²⁴ Interestingly, if only because Peter argues the thematic relationship between *The Waste Land* and Tennyson’s *In Memoriam: A.H.H.*” and Miller argues that Verdenal is elegized in both *The Waste Land* and portions of *Four Quartets*, there is a similar passage in Tennyson’s poem: “Old yew, which graspest at the stones/ That name the underlying dead,/ Thy fibres net the dreamless head,/ Thy roots are wrapped about the bones” (II. 1-4).

²⁵ Whether it was what Eliot was referring to or not, it is of note that *East Coker* was published in 1940, almost exactly twenty years after he wrote *The Waste Land*.

²⁶ The responses of other modernists are also interesting. While Wallace Stevens elevates poetry as “The Supreme Fiction,” Hart Crane attempts, in a Whitmanian fashion, to construct a new spiritual mythology, centering it around “The Bridge.”

²⁷ While first hand knowledge of Kierkegaard would not be necessary to claim that Eliot acts in a manner similar to that laid out by the philosopher, there is good indication that Eliot would have known his writings, as Charles Williams, a good friend of Eliot, brought the first translations of Kierkegaard to England.

²⁸ Obviously, in light of Ishmael, Abraham's son by his servant Hagar, claiming that Isaac is his only son is problem for biblical scholars. However, within the framework of Kierkegaard's study, this discrepancy is not significant and can be disregarded.

²⁹ In Romans 3:27-28, Paul writes: "Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what Law? Of works? Nay: but by the law of faith. Therefore, we conclude, that a man is iustified by faith, without the deeds of law." This is immediately followed, at the beginning of the next chapter, with his examination of Abraham: "What shall we say then, that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh hath found? For if Abraham were iustified by workes, hee hath *whereof* to glory, but not before God. For what saith the Scripture? Abraham beleueed God, and it was counted vnto him for righteousnes. Now to him that worketh, is the reword not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but beleueeth on him that iustified the vngodly; his faith is counted for righteousnesse" (Romans 4:1-5).

³⁰ Again he writes, "Abraham represents faith, and that faith finds its proper expression in him whose life is not only the most paradoxical conceivable, but so paradoxical that is simply cannot be thought. He acts on the strength of the absurd; for it is precisely the absurd that as the single individual he is higher than the universal. This paradox cannot be mediated" (85).

³¹ As a number of commentators have observed and Lyndall Gordon notes in her biography of Eliot, this scene emerges from Eliot's actual experience during the war, as he was involved with ARP (Air Raid Precautions), his duty being to watch "'firecrackers' from a rooftop in South Kensington (a fairly safe post between the bombing points of Earls Court and the Museums)" (375). She continues to explain the setting: "He gazed down on a London much of which had turned into smoldering heaps of rubble. After a raid there would be an eerie silence. There was no traffic, since most of the streets were blocked by fallen

buildings, and hardly any pedestrians, only a pall of smoke and everywhere an acrid smell of burning”
(375).

³² In regards to the use of the poem as a guide to prayer and spirituality, Kierkegaard claims that “people unable to bear the martyrdom of unintelligibility jump off the path, and choose instead, conveniently enough, the world’s admiration of their proficiency. The true knight of faith is a witness, never a teacher”
(107).

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