EAST COKER

1940. EARTH is the second quartet. For the Greeks it was one of the four elements of nature and it was the earth-god Gaia, who like the sea-god Oceanus, was born of the night. At death we return to the earth; it buries us and our civilizations.[130] But the earth nourishes us as it did the simple people of the past and promises the renewal of life.

Eliot saw East Coker, a small village in the county of Somerset in south-west England, as his beginning and his end.

* It was his beginning, since the village was his ancestral home. His forbearer Andrew Elliot emigrated to America from East Coker in the 17th century. Another ancestor, Sir Thomas Elyot, had published in 1531 *The Book Named the Governor* on the humanistic ideals of the Renaissance. Eliot quotes from the book in this quartet.[131]

* It was his end and the end of his family. Eliot, who had no children, is buried in East Coker. The hour of our death is "the hour of our birth".[132]

He visited East Coker in 1937 when he was 50, in mid-life, "the middle of the way", as he will say, quoting Dante.[133] It was about ten years since his acceptance of Christianity.

Eliot took *The Governor*, the first printed work in English on education (1531), to represent the Renaissance, the beginning of the modern period which he thought was coming to an end in the waste land of the 20th century.[134] His ancestor had stressed just what he himself was not so sure about: that the human being as his own "governor" can create a "harmonious" society. Recently influential educators assume that we are already living in a "postmodern" age, questioning not only the utopian expectations of modernity but the very canons of rationality that it retained.

So in *East Coker* several time-strands, which begin and end, are mixed together:

* our modern age
* the Eliot family
* Eliot as a person.

With the help of the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes Eliot will take a closer look at the idea of cyclical time —that seasons, lifetimes, and histories repeat themselves endlessly—, and he will contrast it with a *linear*, straight-line, view of time: that things are going *somewhere*, generally "better" than the present. In the 19th century, Marx saw history, Bergson or Darwin saw life, Hegel saw everything, advancing. For Eliot, all these "ends" —of ourselves, our kin and culture— are figures of *the* ending: dénouement, the finale (the "*eschaton*"), Eden come back. Time points elsewhere, outside of time.[135]

East Coker begins and ends with beginnings and endings. The final words of the poem, "in my end is my beginning" (in French *en ma fin est mon commencement*) was the motto of Mary Queen of Scots, who lived during the Renaissance in the 16th century and was beheaded for political and religious reasons. The words were embroidered on her chair and are now inscribed on Eliot's tombstone in East Coker. But the poem begins with a reversal of the motto: "in my beginning is my end". So the movement of the quartet is:

beginning ⟶ end ⟶ beginning.

The second beginning differs from the first in that it is the *last one*, the "at-last"; *East Coker*, then, moves toward hope.

EC-I: BOUND TO THE EARTH

The first movement shows time moving in a circle: everything —people, history, nature— are earthbound, crude, fleeting, apparently senseless.

EC-Ia: Sameness (1-13)

To dust

The motto "In my beginning is my end" introduces East Coker "materially". "The word "house" includes the Biblical meanings of household, dynasty, and temple. Houses —buildings, families, churches— come and go, may even come back. Solomon's temple was destroyed, later rebuilt, and destroyed again for good. Buildings are torn down to make way for expressways. Their timber is burned as firewood and their stones reused. According

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to the story of the Garden of Eden, toil and death are the result of eating the forbidden fruit, perhaps symbolizing the attempt to decide for ourselves, in humanistic fashion, what is objectively good and bad:

> in the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat thy bread until thou
> return to the ground,
> for from it wast thou taken;
> for dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return.[136]

Eliot's family came to an end when he did. The remains of "man and beast", of our artifacts sacred and profane, mingle together in the earth, with the war materiél mentioned in *Burnt Norton*.[137] Eliot's lines here echo the pessimism —rather the realism— of the Book of Ecclesiastes:

> The lot of man and the lot of beast is but one lot:
> one dies, the other dies, they breathe the same breath;
> man has no advantage, but all is vanity.
> All go to a single place, all are dust and to dust all return.
> Who knows whether
> the breath of the children of man goes upward
> and the breath of the beast goes downward to the
> earth?[138]

Vanity

"Time" here is routine, the seasons of ordinary time, *chronos*, repeating itself over and over. It is, further, a token of *kairos* in the sense, say, of the chance, at some "moment", to become aware of the possibility of timelessness. We are bound to the wheel of life and death, determined by the rhythm of nature. Eliot now imitates Ecclesiastes:

> For every thing there is a time, a season for every purpose
> under the sky:
> a time to be born and a time to die,
> a time to plant and a time to uproot;
> a time to kill and a time to heal,
> a time to tear down and a time to build;
> a time to weep and a time to laugh,
> a time to mourn and a time to dance;
> a time to cast stones away and a time to gather them,

a time to embrace and a time to be far from embracing;
a time to seek and a time to lose,
a time to keep and a time to throw away;
a time to tear and a time to sew,
a time to be still and a time to speak;
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.[139]

Time comes for the "wind" to "shake" the empty house, like the manor house of Eliot's forbearers at East Coker, with its ancient windows, woodwork, and tapestry ("arras"). The "silent motto" recalls not only Mary Queen of Scots "My end is my beginning", but more particularly Eliot's family motto, which with him was to die out: "Be silent and do" (in Latin, *Tace et Fac*). The phrase evokes Eliot's active-passive theme, and he will comment on it in this Quartet.[140]

These "times" are "wind", futility, a puff of breath wasted on the air:

vanity of vanities, says Ecclesiastes,
vanity of vanities, all is vanity…
I have seen all things done under the sun,
and behold, all is vanity and a chase after wind.[141]

In *Dry Salvages* Eliot will say that we "cannot face… steadily" the fact that "time is no healer".[142]

EC-Ib: The Lost Village (14-50)

Eliot now repeats the motto "In my beginning is my end", this time to introduce a kind of daydream of the people who dwelt in East Coker centuries ago. The vision parallels the experience in the rose-garden in the first movement of *Burnt Norton*.

The approach

Eliot addresses the reader personally as "you". "*I*", then, am walking along a road toward his family homestead on an ordinary lazy summer afternoon, "still" and "sultry". The "open field" is sunlit but I am walking in a lane shaded by rows of trees and cut deep by years of traffic. I press close to the bank to let a truck go by. There is a certain passivity in my walking: the lane hems me in and forces me toward the village where it leads.

The setting, like the garden in *Burnt Norton*, is humdrum, ordinary; the lane is dark, hazy, grey. The flowers are asleep; I feel "hypnotized". But there

is suspense; something is going to happen. The air is "electric", as before a storm, just as in the rose-garden the air was "vibrant" with expectation. Then we were told to follow the thrush quickly; now I am invited to "wait for" a bird that will usher in another vision. This time the bird is an owl, symbolizing wisdom —and the night. Eliot will dwell on the ambiguity of wisdom and darkness.[143]

The vision

As long as I do "not come too close" and remain detached both from the ordinariness of the experience and from the experience itself, accepting but not probing it, the scene becomes darker still; it is midnight. I hear music and see common folk from the past playing and dancing on the "open field" around a bonfire, the "bone-fire" of a midsummer feast of ancient nature religion, the fire which for Heraclitus symbolized the flux of reality and its coherence in *logos*. Their dance blends with the dance "along the artery" and "in the drift of stars" in *Burnt Norton*;[144] their music is also the music of the spheres. They are one with earth and sky.

Eliot lifts a section here from *The Governor*, the book written by his 16th-century ancestor. Man and woman dancing together, touching each other, conveys peace, friendship. Their marriage is a "sacrament", for religion is fused into their natural "coupling". They are "dignified", as the garden-people in *Burnt Norton*. The beat of the dance marks the cycle of their lives reflected in the starry sky and in the routines listed in Ecclesiastes: sowing, milking, reaping, mating, voiding. "Dung" and "death", are the end of the digested and of the digester. Eliot displays the closed natural circle of birth, life with its "rustic" solemnity or mirth, and death.

Elsewhere (47-50)

Dawn points toward, begins, "another" day "here" in East Coker with the same "heat" and "silence", as it points out "there" toward the wind ruffling the sea. It is the dust and breath of Ecclesiastes, the same "vanity". Eliot is now "here", but also "there", anywhere, as individual, as kin, as age. And he is "elsewhere". In *Burnt Norton* he said we have been "*there*" but "cannot say where".[145] What is the "silence" for? Eliot mentions only beginnings here, not endings, but in the fifth movement he will speak of a search for "another intensity". In *Little Gidding* Eliot will reflect on the Breath of God.[146]

EC-II: ENDINGS

Eliot now does consider *ends*: of the seasons, of the sky, of the world, of old ages and old people. Is there an ending that is a beginning?

EC-IIa: Denouement (51-67)

Disturbances

Snowdrops bloom in the spring and hollyhocks and roses in the summer. We are surprised if they bloom in late November when winter is coming. Even though they turn "grey" and die quickly, they cause a "disturbance" jarring our perception of the turnover of seasons, the cycle of warmth and cold, life and death. Does this odd "November" in our lives, our families, and in our modernity hint at another sort of spring coming? What kind of spring?

Entropy

The second movement of *Burnt Norton*[147] showed reconciliation both in human history and in the *kosmos*. Now we see nature at war again: "thunder" is also cannonfire, stars are "deployed" as battle chariots, constellations "fight" the sun. But the late autumn sky is all defeat: the sun goes down to the equinox, the moon wanes, stars ("Leonids") fall, fly, in November, hunt the heavens; comets are tears running down the face of the firmament.

Eliot sees not only himself, his family, the modern age, but all nature, the whole universe, reality, as losing the battle, rushing toward its last end. Four endings converge here:

* the entropy of the universe
* the conflagration of Greek philosophy
* the Christian *Eschaton*
* the destiny of each "little soul" at the *Eschaton*.[148]

If *entropy*, the third law of thermodynamics, is right, the world is winding down, cooling off, scattering outward. Its organization is unravelling, evolving toward an Aristotelian "rest", the absence of motion, toward a time when "the ice-cap reigns".

Conflagration

The "vortex" bringing about the "destructive fire" before the entropic chill is like the a "whirl" or "eddy" (*dinē*) that according to early Greek philosopher Democrituas causes the universe to unfold necessarily:

> everything comes about since it is bound to,
> for vortex is its cause, called "Must".[149]

For Heraclitus, unfolding takes place through "war":

> war is common [to all things] and right is strife;
> all things come about through strife and need;
> war is father, king, of all.[150]

Things clash in a huge bonfire: the *kosmos*

> ever was, is, shall be —is everliving fire,
> kindling in measure, burning out in measure,[151]

even as the villagers danced around their own bonfire at home.

The Stoics (and perhaps Heraclitus himself) believed in the *universal conflagration* (*ekpurōsis*). The primeval fire, driven by fate or internal law (*heimarmenē*, *logos*) will eventually consume all of reality.

Still, for Heraclitus the world is from ever and forever, and for Stoics even the *end* of the world is cyclic: there is a never-ending series of worlds ending in conflagration. Some Stoics conceived of the conflagration as a cleansing process; Eliot will speak of the purification of the soul in the next two movements.

The very last thing

Christians held for a linear, straight-line history with a single ending: "the very last thing" (*eschaton*). The early theologian Origin saw it as a "rectification" or "restoration" (*epanorthosis*, *apokatastasis*), a denouement when all people, purified, indeed all things, would return to oneness in God. Greek theologians also saw the end as St. Paul's goal of bringing everything together under Christ (*anakephalaiōsis*):

Then the end,
when [Christ] hands the kingdom over to God the Father; …
when all is put under Him,
then the Son Himself will also be under Him Who put all under Him,
so God may be all in all.[152]

The the once-and-for-all ending of history and nature, has an ethical dimension for Christians: time runs straight to "God's Day", doomsday, when we shall all be judged —justice-at-last. The second book of Peter speaks of the end as a conflagration, as do the Greek philosophers:

God's day will come as a thief in the night,
when the skies shall pass away with a roar,
the elements burn up, melt away,
and the earth and all its deeds shall be burned up.[153]

Jesus quoted the Hebrew prophets when He spoke of the end of the world in the "Synoptic Apocalypse" (in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke): after the "tribulation", the destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70 AD by the Romans,

in those days the sun shall be darkened,
and the moon shall not give its light;
the stars shall fall from the sky
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.[154]

So Eliot's images, then, are both philosophical biblical and recall the apocalypse in *The Waste Land*.[155] But unlike this earlier poem, in *East Coker* there is optimism: that strange hope of "late roses filled with early snow". Jesus —and the author of II Peter— took the cataclysms in the sky as *signs* of the return of the Son of Man. Conflagration means the "arrival + presence" (*parousia*) of Christ, His coming back and staying, Eden come back, God's reigning having come.

EC-IIb: Humility (68-100)

Eliot, then, was ambivalent about social meliorism, the belief in built-in betterments in the history of society. Progressive educators revive the conviction that history of itself head toward a just society, even a "new man". These seem to be religious hopes secularized, the Christian *eschaton* brought down

from the timeless to future time: from the elsewhere and elsewhen to the here and later. Religious hope is based upon "faith", but any secular forecast demands "reasons". Eliot recommends humility in our readings of history, in the understandings of our faith.

Words and revision

Eliot complains again, as in the last movement of *Burnt Norton*, about wrestling "with words and meanings", referring now to the preceding passage, which is complex, roundabout ("periphrastic") and "worn-out". Actually, he says, the "poetry" matters less than the value of our changing expectations that it portrayed.

Did our "elders", forbearers, speaking with such quiet self-assurance —perhaps Sir Thomas in *The Governor*— "deceive" us by letting us expect "serenity" and "wisdom" in history, its old age, our own old age, our family's? Did they believe it themselves? Actually the "calm" they "looked forward to" and "hoped for" was but a "wisdom" only about "dead secrets". Their knowledge is "useless" for the mystery, the "darkness" that they tried to "peer" into or refused to face.

Worse, their dullness, "hebitude", is "deliberate", as if truth were secondary. *Hebitudo mentis*, said St. John of the Cross, affects even the mature and must be dealt with in the darkness of the night:

> dullness of mind,
> and the natural coarseness we all come by through sin,
> and our distracted spirit,
> must be enlightened, taught, and focused
> by the hardship and stress of the night.[156]

As we get older our past folly embarrasses us. The patterns we have imposed on history and on our personal stories get "falsified" as we get older and wiser, and hindsight makes us humbler in their regard. This humility is "endless" not in the sense of a constant futile dialectic but as deepening realization of what must be true. In the waste land, then, a healthy revisionism is appropriate: a *turning*, ongoing *metanoia*, "repentance" in the sense of altering how we think in order to alter what we do.

The "darkness" we try —or do not try— to penetrate is the theme of the first part of the next movement.

The dark wood

Eliot now quotes from the beginning of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*:

> In the middle of the way of our life,
> I found myself in dark wood,
> for the straight way was gone astray.[157]

Eliot stresses that we wander astray in the "dark wood" during our *whole* life, not only in the "middle". St. John of the Cross, besides his doctrine of three nights, saw the soul´s movement toward union with God as a single night having three phases, all dark:

> * the *beginning* —*twilight*—,
> dark because the soul must lack more and more the desires she had for all things of the world,
>
> * the *middle* of the the way —*midnight*—,
> that is, faith, which for her understanding is dark as night,
>
> * the *end* —the *dawn* before daylight—
> God, Who, neither more nor less, is a dark night for the soul in this life.[158]

Eliot takes us with Sherlock Holmes, Arthur Conan Doyle's rationalist detective, "all the way" into the trackless "Grimpen" Mire, where lurks the terrifying Hound of the Baskervilles. It is not a real monster, since its "fancy lights" are only phosphorus paint. But losing our "foothold" in the "little green patches" of quicksand is a real threat. There are dangers and enchantments, real and imagined, all along our dark way —even at the end.

The wisdom of the old

Eliot was questioning the "value" of the "wisdom of age"; now he speaks of "old men", not only of the "wise" men of the past but of the elderly today. Ecclesiastes had posed the problem:

> I said, "I shall be wise", but wisdom was far off;
> And what is far off, what is deep, deep—
> who shall find it?[159]

Theirs is not wisdom but "folly": they are afraid of fear, of their final "frenzy" of death, of losing control, being owned by, belonging to others, to God. There is no more resolution at the end of our ages, personal or historical, than at the beginning. He will bring up the paradoxes of old age again in *Dry Salvages*.[160]

Humility is the only wisdom open to the old, but only as long as they become "explorers", as Eliot will say at the end of the quartet.[161] For St. Benedict humility sums up the spiritual life and for St. Bernard, the "grades of humility" structure its development. St. Paul told the Philippians that they should have a "mind that is also in Christ Jesus, who humbled himself… to the death on the cross".[162] Humility is Heraclitus's "down is up" and John of the Cross's having "nothing" yet having "everything". Eliot will quote him in the next movement on detachment, the need to be stripped of everything on the way "up" to God.[163]

Earthbound

At the end of the movement Eliot uses phrases from Robert Louis Stevenson's *Requiem*. The "houses" —homes, clans, temples— and peasant "dancers" of the past, which he spoke of in the first movement are now "all gone". In *The Waste Land* the clerk visits the secretary as a "sailor home from sea" and Phlebas the Phoenician is submerged in the sea.[164] We all end up underwater or underground. But may our end also be, as Stevenson's epitaph suggests, a homecoming?

> Hear he lies where he longed to be;
> Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
> And the hunter home from the hill.[165]

EC-III: DARKNESS

Eliot now focuses more explicitly on the ambiguity of the "dark", symbol of the purgation antecedent to the encounter with the Eternal.

EC-IIIa: Two kinds of darkness (101-111)

Modernity

The first half of the first line of this movement is a quote from Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. Samson, after allowing himself —rather stupidly— to be betrayed by Delilah, was blinded by the Philistines; he laments:

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> O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,
>
> Irrecoverably dark, total eclipse
> Without all hope of day!
> O first-created beam, and thou great Word,
> "Let there be light, and light was over all".
> The sun to me is dark
> And silent is the moon,
> When she deserts the night,
> Hid in her vacant interlunar cave.[166]

Later Eliot will speak of the sun and moon. The second half of the first line is the beginning of a poem by poet Henry Vaughan, referring to dead friends; Eliot reverses the intent by changing "light" to "dark":

> They have all gone into the world of light!...
> O holy hope, and high humility;
> High as the heavens above!...
> Dear, beauteous death! the jewel of the just,
> Shining nowhere but in the dark;
> What mysteries do lie beyond thy dust,
> Could man outlook that mark [limit]!...
> O Father of eternal life…
> remove me hence unto that hill[167]

of the heavenly Zion. The dark, death, life, hope; all is now *paradox*.

Earlier, in the second movement, Eliot saw everything heading down into a dark, cold vacuum among the stars, like the commuters going down into the Tube in *Burnt Norton* or crossing the bridge into the "unreal city" in *The Waste Land*, as the dead go down into Dante's hell.[168] The dark claims everybody: bankers, *littérateurs* and *artistes*, politicians, bureaucrats, big and small business hustlers, stockbrokers, captains of industry ("Gazette"), nobles ("Almanach de Gotha"). And "we all go with them". Nor do we understand why we are doing all this, why this is happening; our knowledge has "only a limited value".

Eliot in *Four Quartets* has not become more optimistic about the waste land. The culture of capitalism and socialism contrasts with the ideals, worldly and religious, of *Re*-naissance and *Re*-formation; we have not, in fact, been born or formed *again*. We all attend the funeral but, since our death is spiritual, if there is any corpse to bury it is our own.

EC-IIIb Waiting (112-146)

Tace, anima

Eliot tells his soul to accept another kind of darkness: "the darkness of God". The context again is apophatic theology. St. John of the Cross spoke of the "blessed adventure" of meeting God when our "home is stilled at last", when the soul is like the weaned baby of the psalm, making no more demands:

> I have stilled and quieted my soul;
> as a weaned child upon its mother's breast,
> like a child weaned, so is my soul upon me;
> O Israel, hope in the Lord,
> now and forever.[169]

John speaks of the darkness of passive purification; we must "still" our house to let God act upon it.

The next three images show how the flow of our lives is suddenly broken by unforeseen or uncontrolled happenings, perhaps by *kairoi*, when our mind is emptied of the humdrum, yet with uncanny expectation:

* we lose the thread of the play when the performance pauses for a set change

* our uneasiness grows as we run out of small talk when the train in the Tube —in the "dim light" in Burnt Norton—[170] unexpectedly halts in the tunnel,

* our consciousness is interrupted when we are anesthetized for an operation.

This last image recalls the middle-aged anti-hero of Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*:

> Let us go then, you and I,
> When the evening is spread out against the sky
> Like a patient etherized upon a table;

and we are lead:

> ...to an overwhelming question…
> Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"

French philosopher Henri Bergson defined living as growing old, and Prufrock muses:

> I grow old… I grow old…
> I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled,

with the anxiety of social survival.

The theological virtues

St. John of the Cross taught that to purify the soul for union with Him, God fills its three non-material functions ("powers", "faculties") with the "theological virtues", faith, hope, and charity. This divine initiative takes place during the second night, the night of the "spirit" or of "faith", when

* faith in the intellect
brings about an emptiness and darkness of understanding,

* hope in the memory
brings about an emptiness of all owning,

* love in the will
brings about an emptiness and a bareness of all liking and gladness
in whatever is not God…

and so these three virtues put the soul into a darkness in all things into a void.[171]

Eliot wished his soul to "be still" and to "wait". For faith, hope, and love "are all in the waiting": we must await, *undergo*, God's emptying action. To gain this passivity, says John of the Cross, the soul must as far as possible stop filling the faculties with its own content, which would be "the wrong thing"; we must rather wait for God:

* without our own thought, since we are not "ready" for the "thought" of faith
* without hope for the wrong thing, our own goals
* without love for the wrong thing, what is beloved to us.

Bright darkness

Eliot speaks of paradoxes of motion and light. The "stillness" is "dancing", not the dance of the blood and the stars nor the villagers' dance around the bonfire, but the dance "at the still point" of *Burnt Norton*.[172] And when he says that darkness is somehow "the light", he is using a key image in the mystical theology of Dionysius, who wished God to draw his disciple up

> to where secrets of Godword,
> plain, alone, unchanging,
> lurk in the shining dark of silence,
> outshining in deepest darkness
> the brightest glare…
> to the ray of divine darkness…[173]

St. John of the Cross used this passage to explain why God "infuses" contemplation into the soul only "in dark of night":

> when this divine light of contemplation strikes a soul not yet
> fully enlightened,
> it brings spiritual darkness to her, since not only is it beyond her,
> but it takes from her, darkens, the act of her natural
> understanding.

St. Dionysius and other mystical theologians call this infused contemplation "a ray of darkness"; as David also said,

> near God, about Him, is darkness and clouds—

dark not in Himself, but for our weak understandings….
This is why God,

> sending this bright ray of His secret wisdom
> from Himself to the soul not yet transformed,

brings thick darkness to her understanding.[174]

Caution

"Running streams" again recalls the *Spiritual Canticle* of St. John of the Cross; here the verse following the stanza on Bride's "pool experience":

My Love the mountains,
wild lowlands wooded,
odd islands,
rushing rivers,
breaths of love whispering.[175]

Hearing the stream, seeing the lightning, smelling the thyme, listening to the laughter of the garden-children at the pool in *Burnt Norton*, are *kairoi*, unexpected, given, moments. They are sensual, powerful, "ecstatic", but they may "echo" a deeper Reality. They are also ambiguous and John of the Cross advises reserve. He comments on the beginning of the *Spiritual Canticle*,

Where hidest Thou,
Love, leaving me breathless…?

in this way:

No matter how grand the communications and feelings of His presence,
no matter how high and lofty the notions about God
that the soul may have in this life—
all this is not God essentially, nor does it have anything to do with Him,
since in truth He is still hidden to the soul,
and she always had better think Him hidden above all those grand experiences
and seek Him hidden, asking

Where hidest Thou?

For neither a lofty communication nor His felt presence is a sure sign of His presence through grace,
nor is dryness and a lack of all that in the soul a sure sign of His absence in it.[176]

However, neither should these moments be "lost" as isolated happenings. They should "echo" later in our lives and be "requiring", making demands on us. They "point" away from themselves to "agony". The word refers especially to the suffering before death, but here, paradoxically, it is

the pangs "of death and birth", the end which is the beginning. The ecstasy points to the darkness: dying to self and letting God bring to life again:

> Unless the grain of wheat falling to the ground dies, itself
> remains alone.[177]

The ascent

"Ecstasy", then does not continue; we rather find "ignorance", "dispossession" along the way. St. Teresa of Avila was surprised that when the soul enters the innermost chamber of the inner castle wherein God dwells

> all ecstasies are taken from her,
> unless it be just once,
> and then without those raptures and flight of spirit.[178]

Eliot repeats what he has said on detachment in the third movement of *Burnt Norton*, but this time his words are almost a translation of the nothing-all paradoxes that St. John of the Cross wrote under his well-known drawing of Mount Carmel. For him, spiritual maturing is like climbing a mountain; on the way up more and more is let go of (he wrote "*nada*" seven times on the ascending path), for God alone is at the summit.

> To come to taste all,
> wish to taste nothing;
> to come to know all,
> wish to know nothing of anything;
> to come to own all,
> wish to own nothing in anything;
> to come to be all,
> wish to be nothing in anything.
> to come to what you taste not,
> you must go through where you taste not;
> to come to what you know not,
> you must go through where you know not;
> to come to what you own not,
> you must go through where you own not;
> to come to what you are not
> you must go through where you are not.[179]

EC-IV: HEALING (147-171)

In these five stanzas of regular rhythm and rhyme, Eliot describes the paradox that it is painful to heal pain. Restoring health is a metaphor for God's love for man; others are buying back ("redemption"), rescuing ("salvation"), and freeing ("deliverance"). The Old English word for savior was "healer", and "salvation" and "health" are the same word in Latin, French and other languages. Eliot stresses the painful healing in the life of Christ Himself.

The wounded doctor

The surgery which cures the "enigma" of our "fever" is painful, "sharp". St. Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, martyred in Rome at the beginning of the second century, said that Christ is our doctor —a paradox:

> There is but one Physician,
> both flesh and spirit, born yet unborn,
> who is God in man, in death true life,
> both of Mary and of God,
> first undergoing pain, then freed from pain:
> Jesus Christ our Lord.[180]

The "surgeon" is "compassionate"; He is himself is "wounded" and has "bleeding hands". Christ was identified with God's slave in the Servant Songs of Isaiah,

> spurned, shunned,
> a Man of sorrows, knowing illness;
> we turned our gaze from Him,
> did not watch Him scorned;
> yet He was bearing our griefs,
> undergoing our sorrows,
> while we thought Him hurt,
> struck, brought low, by God;
> He was wounded, pierced, for our wrongs,
> crushed for our sins,
> on Him was the punishment giving us peace,
> by His stripes we are healed;

we were straying like sheep,
each turning his own way,
yet God laid upon Him
the guilt of us all.[181]

The dying nurse

The "disease", "Adam's curse", is original sin: misery and mortality, proneness to dishonor and folly, ignorance and arrogance. The "sickness" is "flesh" in the Biblical sense. St. Paul's personified "Sin" (*hamartia*): it defines "this world", the waste land. But "health" is itself an aspect of the sickness, because gaining it makes demands. Poet Andrew Marvell said the soul is forced to bear the body's grief,

And all my care itself employs,
That to preserve which me destroys;
Constrained not only to endure
Diseases, but, what's worse, the cure;
And ready oft the port to gain,
Am shipwrecked into health again.[182]

"Obeying" the "nurse" means following Christ and His church; "dying" because, as Paul said,

since One died for all, all died.[183]

The "constant care" of the church holds out hope for health. But it recognizes the "disease", and so does not affirm us in what we are, aiming "to please" us, but insists upon aggressive treatment, for to get better we must get "worse".

St. John of the Cross said that the soul is "safe" setting out in search of God

in dark of night,…
I left unseen,…

in darkness, but *safe*,
oh blessed grace,
in darkness, lurking,
my home stilled at last.

The chief reason why the soul is safe, he explained, is that

> this dark night of contemplation
> so engulfs, folds her into itself, and draws her so close to God,
> that it shelters and frees her from all that is not God.
> For, as the soul is placed under care here to regain her *Health*,
> —which is God Himself—,
> His Majesty keeps her on a diet and in abstinence from all things,
> spoiling her taste for everything;
> just as the family of a beloved sick person, in order to cure him,
> keeps him indoors, lets him feel no air and enjoy no light,
> and makes sure that he hears no footsteps,
> even the murmur of those in the house,
> and that his food is very bland, chosen more for substance than flavor.[184]

The hospital

For Sir Thomas Browne, called "the metaphysical poet in prose", this world is

> not an inn but an hospital
> a place not to live in but to die in.[185]

The Anglican divine Lancelot Andrewes said that God visits the sinner

> as a great prince should go into an hospital
> to visit and look on a loathsome diseased creature;
> not only to visit him,
> but to look to his "purging" from that his uncleanness.[186]

Adam is the "millionaire" to whose "ruin" God our Father responded. Paradoxically, the best we can do in the hospital is allow ourselves to "die" of His "care". The dying has St. Paul's sense: Christ's

> death was death to Sin once for all, His life is life for God;
> likewise think yourselves dead to Sin and living to God
> in Christ Jesus.[187]

But death in the literal sense is not excluded. St. John and St. Teresa both wrote poems having the same refrain:

Teresa:

> I live, now not in me,
> and my high hope is that
> *I die, for I do not die*,

John:

> I live, now not in me,
> And such is my hope that
> *I die, for I do not die*,

reflecting the Pauline theme "death, where is thy sting?"[188]

The word "prevents" suggests a limitation on our range of action, but it is also a theological term retaining its literal sense of grace "coming before". "Care", then, is "prevenient grace", God's "absolute" help, which precedes all that we "do" and follows it, never leaving us. St. Augustine said that grace:

> comes before to heal us, follows after to quicken us once healed;
> it comes before to call us, follows after to glorify us.[189]

This is the sense of the collect from *The Book of Common Prayer*:

> Prevent us, O Lord, in all our doings
> with Thy most gracious favor,
> and further us with Thy continual help.[190]

William Byrd, Catholic convert of the 16th century, composed an anthem with this text.

Purgatory

Eliot uses another pair of contrasting metaphors to illustrate the paradoxical nature of spiritual maturing: chilling and burning, warming and freezing, shivering in "purgatorial fires". He may associate cold with the purgation of feelings and heat with "mental" purgation, that is, of the spirit.[191]

Purgatory belongs to Catholic eschatological belief, along with heaven and hell. The duality of heaven and hell also assumes an ethical ideal: honor and happiness ought to come together and so dishonor and affliction.[192] Job presented himself as a living, "logically valid", counterexample to the theory of his "Consolers" that those who suffer are sinners, since he suffered even

though he was "blameless and upright". And God declared him right and his Consolers wrong.[193]

For the philosopher Kant, the prospect of happiness and goodness coming together "postulates" not only that human beings are free and survive death, but also that God exists to join them. The beatitudes affirm that this ethical expectation will somehow find fulfillment:

> blessed are ye poor, for yours is the kingdom of God
> blessed are ye who hunger now, for ye shall be filled,
> blessed are ye who weep now, for ye shall laugh;
>
> but woe unto you who are rich, for ye have received your
> consolation,
> woe unto ye who are full, for ye shall hunger,
> woe unto you who laugh now, for ye shall mourn and weep.[194]

If heaven and hell are eschatological absolutes of right and wrong, "purgatorial fires" mark a movement from wrong to right, from suffering to joy. Purgatory is the continuation in the world to come of the spiritual "purgation" that Eliot has been stressing. Dante's purgatory will be an important theme in *Little Gidding*.[195]

Purgation is "flame", "roses", love. And it is "smoke", destruction, as it will be in *Little Gidding*, and unknowing, as the smoke that hid God from Moses on Mount Sinai.[196] "Briars" may imply that what goes up in smoke is, after all, something that had choked off growth. If the word hints at the crown of thorns the soldiers placed on the head of Jesus in mockery, the allusion would introduce the final stanza of this movement.

For St. John of the Cross too, the burning of love is ambiguous:

> Oh living Flame of Love,
> meek, yet hurting me
> deep at midsoul;
> Thou so art unwilling no longer,
> and if willing now, consummate,
> tear through the veil to make us one.

Oh cautery, searing cool,
wounding kindly,
oh soft hand, gentle stroke,
tasting of lasting life,
settling all I owe,
putting death to life.

Oh lamps of fire,
in thy flarings
deep hollows of feeling,
once black and blind,
now odd, lovely,
yield warmth and light to their Beloved.

How gentle, loving,
Thou com'st awake in my heart,
where in secret Thou dwellest alone,
and breathing delight,
full of good and glory,
Thou quietly win'st my love away.

Eucharist

The "bloody flesh" of Jesus on Good Friday provided the "only" medicine for the human disease. In his sermon Lancelot Andrewes went on to say: God comes to heal

by His own Self in Person,...
Himself to minister and make the medicine,
to make it Himself, and make it of Himself,
to make the medicine, and be the medicine....
Spots will out with water; some will not with anything but with blood;
...and not every blood will serve, but it must be lamb's blood,...
and not every lamb neither, but "the Lamb of God":
...and of... His best, most precious, His heart-blood,
which bringeth certain death with it;

with that blood He was to make the medicine....
by Himself, His own self, and by Himself slain;
by His death, and by His Blood-shedding, and by no other means;
who ever heard of such a thing?
The physician slain,
and of His Flesh and Blood a receipt made,
that the patient might recover.

Andrewes refers to the book of *Revelation*, where Christ,

Who loves and washes us from our sins by His own blood,

is the Lamb praised in a "new hymn":

with Thy blood Thou hast purchased us for God
those of every kindred, tongue, every people and nation.[197]

Andrewes is speaking of the Eucharist, sacramentally (symbolically yet somehow really) making us present now at Jesus's death; St. Paul passed on this tradition:

For I took from the Lord what I also hand on to you:
on the night He was handed over,
the lord Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and said:
This is My body which is for you;
do this in remembrance of Me;
also after supper He took the cup, saying:
This cup is the new covenant in My Blood;
whenever you drink it,
do this in remembrance of Me.[198]

Eliot speaks of our "only" drink and food, thinking perhaps of Jesus's words in St. John's Gospel:

Amen, amen, I say to you,
unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood,
ye shall have no life in you;
who eateth my flesh and drinketh My blood hath life everlasting,
and I shall raise him up on the last day.[199]

Dwellers in the waste land do not aspire to Christian eschatology. Jesus asked His Father to give us our substantial[200] bread, but our own flesh and blood, we think, is "substantial" enough, actually quite "sound". Even religious people are like Eliot's "broad-backed hippopotamus", which

> rests on his belly in the mud;
> although he seems so firm to us
> he is merely flesh and blood;

or French poet Théophile Gautier's "big-bellied hippopotamus":

> I am like the hippopotamus:
> by my conviction covered,
> thick armor nothing pierces,
> I fearless go through the waste land.[201]

The waste land does not understand the final paradox of "*Good* Friday"

EC-V: STRIVING

EC-Va: Attempts (172-189)

Words

Eliot continues his remarks on writing from the last movement of *Burnt Norton*. Now, in 1940, he finds himself, with Dante, in the "middle" of his way, having "largely wasted", he says, the twenty years in the lull "between two wars".[202] He sees these lost years not only as a political and ethical failure, but as a losing battle on words.

But what can the poet do with massive linguistic trauma, with the "mess" of language "deteriorating" from advertising, political spin, ideological manipulation? Today when "conditions seem unpropitious", we must at least "try" to win back, with creativity but within tradition ("by strength and submission, past discoveries, "now lost", by those whom we "cannot hope to imitate". Eliot had written:

> there can be no art *greater* than the art which has already been created: only... necessarily different combinations of the eternal and the changing in the forms of art.[203]

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The religious wording of the previous movement may sound off-putting. Indeed, the times are especially "unpropitious" for "getting the better of" *sacred* words, in the midst "squads of emotion" that no longer "reach into the silence,… reach the stillness".[204] If "new beginnings" include the spiritual "ventures" of saints in the past, the phrase "by strength and submission" suggests that the religious poet today may defend and credit their experiences, perhaps adjoining a "moment" of his or her own.

The rest

Eliot invites us to try, to do what we can, and the "rest", success or failure in several senses, is out of our hands. In *Dry Salvages* he will say "do not think of the fruit of action" from the viewpoints of the Hindu karma and also from that of Christian detachment —say, of Meister Eckhart, who went so far as to recommend that we do "all our works without asking why".[205]

The "rest" recalls "The Pulley", a poem by George Herbert, "the holy" Anglican divine.[206] After giving the human being "strength" and other blessings, God withheld the last: *rest*, since

> He would adore My gifts instead of Me,
> And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature;
> So both should losers be.

He should not rest in his own wealth, he says, but seek rest. God did give him rest, but

> ...with repining restlessness.
> Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
> If goodness lead him not, yet weariness
> May toss him to My breast.

Eliot's mother used the word in another sense:

> Purge from thy heart all sensual desire,
> Let low ambitions perish in the fire
> Of higher aims. Then, as the transient dies,
> The eternal shall unfold before thine eyes,
> The fleeting hours will grant thee thy request:
> Take thou immortal gifts and leave the rest.[207]

EC-Vb: Home and beyond (190-209)

Leaving home

Robert Louis Stevenson spoke of coming home in death, St. John of the Cross of leaving his home, now stilled, for God.[208] Eliot "started from" the home of his birth and the home of his ancestors, and he now leaves home in an end which is his "new beginning"— the final line of *East Coker* reverses the first. And he expects the elderly to go on setting out.

It has been noticed how old people, before dying, become more and more disengaged from the "the world". Eliot said the world becomes "stranger" for us "as we grow older", perhaps more mysterious, because the ideas that used to go without saying for us may now seem naive. It takes "endless humility" to try to understand life and death[209] and even, especially, those uncanny "sudden illuminations",[210] like the "intense moment" at the pool that Eliot described in *Burnt Norton*. It was a gap of a few seconds with "no before and after", empty of time and so intimating timelessness. Eliot was particularly interested making sense of these experiences that "tease us out of thought".

But now he contrasts the "isolated" timeless moment with *lifetime*, ongoing *kairos*, burning at "every moment" of our life and of the lives of others, even of the dead whose names (Eliot's as well) have worn away on their tombstones in East Coker.[211] Eliot has just outlined the teaching of St. John of the Cross on the night of the spirit, when God replaces the contents of the faculties with the theological virtues: the mind with faith, the memory with hope and the will with love;[212] now he fills the moment with life.

He seems to see "lifetime burning" as recollection, gathering our faculties on God. "Praying always", " night and day", "at every moment", "without ceasing" has been a central spiritual ideal:[213] The context here is eschatological. To show that

> we ought always to pray and not lose heart,

Jesus told the parable of the widow who wrested justice from the wicked judge just by tiring him out— all the more speedily, He added, will the just Judge take the part of

> those crying out day and night to Him;
> but the Son of Man, when He comes, will He actually find faith
> on the earth?[214]

John of the Cross described the "highest" recollection as

> placing the soul in all its faculties only in the Good that we cannot understand and withdrawing it from all things that we grasp because they are not [goods which] we cannot understand.[215]

Love most nearly itself

There are "times for" family memories recorded in albums, like getting together under the stars. But the "vanity" of the "here and now" that so struck Ecclesiastes fades "when love is most nearly itself". Love, God, "is itself" *tout court*, for He "is love".[216] But Jesus prayed

> that the love with which Thou hast loved Me may be in them and I in them.[217]

Love is "*nearly* itself" is the human being who is united with God through *theōsis*, "divinization" after *katharsis*, "purification", in Eastern tradition, or through "transformation" in the night, in St. John of the Cross:

> Oh night, leading,
> Night lovelier than the dawn,
> Oh night forming
> Love with Lover,
> Lover one with Lover.[218]

He comments that he is speaking here of "secret contemplation":

> contemplation is love-science,
> knowledge of a loving God
> poured into the soul,
> giving her light and love together,
> raising her level by level
> up to God, her Maker,
> for love alone joins and ones the soul with God.[219]

Ulysses

"Old men", Eliot explained, have no special wisdom; on the contrary, they should be endlessly humble about what they think.[220] Still, he supposes, they should never give up, but go on exploring, like Ulysses, the hero of the *Odyssey*,

...the man,
from the time of the fall of Troy,
who saw the manners and cities of many men,[221]

quoted by Dante as telling about his final adventure:

neither tenderness for my son, nor honor
for my aged father, nor the love I owed
Penelope, which should have made her happy,
could overcome the passion I had in myself
to become experienced in the world
and about human vices and worth.[222]

So the old king set sail toward the Straight of Gibraltar, the "Pillars of Hercules" that warned

man not to fare beyond

out into the Atlantic, and urged his companions not to deny to

the little waking time left to your senses
an experience beyond the sun of a world unpeopled;
ponder your origin:
you were made not to live like animals
but to follow virtue and knowledge.

Tennyson had Ulysses say:

Much have I seen and known —cities of men
And manners...
Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough
Gleams that untraveled world whose margin fades
forever and forever when I move….
Little remains: but every hour is saved
From that eternal silence, something more,
A bringer of new things; and vile it were
For some three suns to store and hoard myself,
And this gray spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,

> Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.
> ... my purpose holds
> To sail beyond the sunset...
> To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.[223]

But there is an ambiguity here. Tennyson may have thought that Ulysses was more foolhardy than heroic,[224] and Dante places him in hell for giving irresponsible advice. In the *Divine Comedy* Ulysses tells Dante how his company sallied into the Atlantic, far south, but after sighting a huge mountain, the Mount of Purgatory, they were swallowed up by the sea.[225]

Purgatory is like St. Paul's "not yet":

> not that I have already gained it or have already become perfect,
> but I strain after it to see if I can win it,
> since I have been won by Christ;
> brothers,
> I do not yet think I have won it, but one thing I do know:
> forgetting what is behind,
> stretching out for what is ahead,
> I strive after the goal, for the prize of the upward calling of God
> in Christ Jesus.[226]

The last two "purifications" are the night of the spirit and purgatory for St. John of the Cross. He thought that before even the hardiest soul is united with God in a "spiritual marriage", she must pass through a second night,

> a purgation darker, gloomier, more dreadful[227]

than the first. But the spiritual marriage is consummated only in heaven. In his *Spiritual Canticle*, which would chronicle the history of the soul's advance in love to God, the last stanzas refer to "the beatific state, which is the only thing that the soul in perfection aspires to",[228] for

> the Son of God wished to take her from the spiritual marriage…
> to the glorious marriage of the church triumphant.[229]

Of this heavenly marriage he wrote:

The breath of wind,
The nightingale, its song,
The grace of trees,
Night hushed down,
The blaze, not harming but burning.[230]

Eliot may refer to this second purification, purgatory, as

the dark cold and the empty desolation

through which we must remain quiet and at rest ("still"), yet keep "moving into another intensity", for a "further union" and a "deeper communion" —go on "exploring" as we grow old. "Here or there", Ithaca, the "home" of Ulysses, or the South Atlantic, it is all the same. The word "still", like the "rest" of George Herbert, encodes the ideal: we must be still to perceive but still strive to go beyond. This is the humility of the old.

The waters

In an earlier version of the fifth movement of *Burnt Norton,* Eliot included a reference to the Hindu holy books *Aranyaka*, "of the wilderness". The work was intended to be read by hermits, especially older men who after an active life withdrew to the solitude of the forest.[231] This custom is known in the Russian church (the *pust'inya*, "desert") and goes back to the Bible, where the waste land is the place of encounter with God. The "Desert Fathers" also followed this tradition when they retired to the waste land, and also the Irish hermits who sought God at the barren seaside.[232]

The Hebrew Scriptures see God as rescuing us from "vast waters". He saved Noah from the flood, He brought the Hebrews through the Red Sea "dry shod", and if it had not been for Him, says the psalmist,

then had the waters overwhelmed us, the torrent swept over our soul,
then the raging waters had poured over our soul.[233]

Eliot links the waters —ambiguous, since they purify as well as drown— to the "dark cold" and "empty desolation". He is anticipating *The Dry Salvages*, where water will be the basic symbol. But here the first words of *East Coker* are reversed: now the ending is the beginning —there is hope for that "further union, deeper communication".