

A Pattern of Timeless Moments:

Existence and History in T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*

Copyright 2005 Glenn Hughes

Though I had begun reading the poetry of T. S. Eliot in high school, my first encounter with his masterpiece, the poem-cycle *Four Quartets*, occurred when I was twenty, in 1972. The conditions were unusually felicitous. I was visiting--actually, cadging off of--friends of my parents who for a sabbatical year had rented a house in the countryside of Kent in southeast England. During a period when my host family was away traveling for a few days, I noticed in the daily newspaper that BBC radio was to be broadcasting, that evening, a reading by Alec Guinness of Eliot's *Four Quartets* in its entirety. At the appointed time I turned off all but one lamp, lay down on a couch, and listened.

This first encounter with the *Quartets* was therefore appropriately auditory and incantatory. It was also vision-inducing, strangely moving, and deeply perplexing. (Eliot has said, famously, that great poetry communicates before it is understood; this listening experience remains my touchstone for the truth of that remark.) Within days I had bought a cheap Faber & Faber paperback edition of the *Quartets* and had begun the process, as yet unfinished, of reading and re-reading, reciting, meditating upon, and consulting the occasional critical study of, what I am inclined to think of as the greatest English-language poem of the twentieth century.

Six years after discovering the *Quartets*, I began reading Eric Voegelin, under the tutelage of Tom McPartland and Eugene Webb--first some of the shorter late essays, then the first four volumes of *Order and History*, and then the later long essays including "The Beginning

and the Beyond," which was circulating in typescript. There ensued, then, the years of re-reading and wider reading in Voegelin, the struggles with difficult concepts and passages, the long and unfinishable climb toward Voegelin's intellectual vistas, the perpetual inspiration from his writings, and eventually, recurrent efforts to write on aspects of his thought, which continue, just as does my occasional re-reading of the *Four Quartets*.

I begin with this biographical account because I believe that my prior exposure to Eliot's vision of human existence and of history in the *Four Quartets* was a not-insignificant factor in disposing me toward understanding and loving Voegelin's philosophy when I came to encounter it. It appears to me that Eliot's meditative, poetic vision of existence and history in the *Four Quartets* and Voegelin's meditation-grounded philosophical analyses of existence and history--especially in his later writings--are mutually compatible and illuminating to an extraordinary degree, not only in comprehensive vision but in significant detail.

To support this assertion it will suffice, I think, to address three major parallels between themes in Eliot's *Four Quartets* and in Voegelin's work. First, both writers view human existence as life in the in-between of time and timelessness, what Voegelin calls life in the tension of the *metaxy*. Second, as a consequence, they both reject the common notion of historical meaning as *fundamentally* a matter of temporal development or progress, but rather both regard history as having a *metaxic* structure and meaning--that is, as being constituted most significantly by the relation between human events unfolding in time and the timelessness of divine meaning, a notion that leads Eliot to call history "a pattern of timeless moments."¹ [1] And third, both

¹ [1] T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), 58 (*Little Gidding* V, 234-35). All further references to poem, movement, and line numbers in the *Four Quartets* will be given parenthetically in the text, with page references to this edition provided in the footnotes.

Voegelin and Eliot affirm a mystically apprehended, radically transcendent ground of being, which is differentiated to the highest degree in Christian experience and symbol, but which is also universally the divine presence in experiences of human-divine encounter as these have been symbolized from ancient times to the present, both in the East and in the West.

Voegelin's acquaintance with the *Four Quartets*, and his admiration for the poem, is familiar to his readers, principally from his use of a sequence of quotations from it in his essay "Immortality: Experience and Symbol" (1967), where he declares that Eliot has, in certain passages, "excellently symbolized" Voegelin's own view of human existence as intermediate between time and timelessness, and has expressed in the poem the same experience for which Plato developed the symbol of the *metaxy*.² [2] Those who have been able to keep up with the recently issued volumes of Voegelin's *Collected Works* are also aware, since the publication last year of volume 33, *The Drama of Humanity and Other Miscellaneous Papers, 1939-1985*, that Voegelin's familiarity with and attraction to the *Four Quartets* was of long standing. The third chapter in volume 33, about eight pages long, reproduces a typescript from about 1944 (the year the poem-cycle was first published in its entirety) titled "Notes on T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*," and is an incisive, compact rumination on the poem's nature, structure, and subject-matter, in which Voegelin's genius for deep reading is in full evidence.³ [3] These are indeed "notes"--Voegelin's text is descriptive, not an exercise in critical evaluation--but their tone is one of

2 [2] Eric Voegelin, "Immortality: Experience and Symbol," in Voegelin, *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, vol. 12 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 77; see also 71, 79-80.

3 [3] Eric Voegelin, "Notes on T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*," in Voegelin, *The Drama of Humanity and Other Miscellaneous Papers, 1939-1985*, eds. William Petropulos and Gilbert Weiss, vol. 33 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia, Mo: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 33-40.

intensely admiring attention, and Voegelin's sense of like-mindedness with the poet's insights into existence and history is obvious throughout. The "Notes" are an early indication of the deep harmony between the vision of the *Four Quartets* and Voegelin's developing, and eventual, philosophical outlook.

I

Before examining that harmony by way of a consideration of selected passages from the *Four Quartets*, it will be helpful to provide a bit of orientation by briefly describing the poem-cycle.

Four Quartets (1936-1942) is a sequence of four poems, altogether somewhat under 900 lines in length, that constitutes a Christian's meditation on existence, time and eternity, death, history, tradition, language, and divinity. The titles of the four poems are place-names related to the poet's personal experiences and to his family's past. *Burnt Norton* is the name of a deserted mansion with a formal garden in the countryside of Gloucestershire, which Eliot visited in the summer of 1934. *East Coker* is a village in Somerset from whence Eliot's family emigrated to America in the seventeenth century, and also the home of a distinguished (probable) family relation of the sixteenth century, Sir Thomas Elyot, who wrote the first English-language treatise on education (a few phrases of which are quoted in the poem). *The Dry Salvages* are a small group of rocks off Cape Ann near Gloucester, Massachusetts, a locale that evokes both Eliot's ancestors' initial emigration to New England before their move further west to St. Louis, and also Eliot's early years in and around Boston. *Little Gidding* is a village in Huntingdonshire, visited by Eliot in 1936, where an important religious community was founded in the 1620s by the Anglican monk Nicholas Ferrar, who is understood to have influenced the poets George

Herbert and Richard Crashaw. The community was broken up under Cromwell's rule in 1647.⁴
[4]

As one's appreciation of the *Quartets* deepens, these geographical titles come to be understood as symbols of significant stages in the poet's journey of spiritual self-discovery. Voegelin's "Notes" describe the essential theme of each stage in this journey: *Burnt Norton* presents the individual meditating on the concrete, complex present of actualities and unchosen possibilities, of existence in the flow of time, a temporal existence which is open, however, to unexpected or disciplined apprehensions of timeless reality; *East Coker* broadens the poet's meditation on existence by introducing its temporal layers of family and cultural heritage, social and technological change, and the depths of history; *The Dry Salvages*, the "nature poem," deepens the existential meditation further, shifting the focus from historical community to the individual's consciousness of the pervasive immediacy of death and of a beyond of history; and finally, in *Little Gidding*, a meditative sense of the timeless reveals world, history, and cultural heritage transfigured by the poet's intense consciousness of human existence as the intersection of the timeless with time.⁵ [5]

The four poems are carefully related to each other and shaped into a unified whole through many means.

4 [4] Harry Blamires, *Word Unheard: A Guide Through Eliot's Four Quartets* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1969), 41, 82-83, 123-24; C. A. Bodelsen, *T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets: A Commentary* (Copenhagen: Copenhagen University Publications Fund, Rosenkilder & Bagger, 1966, 2nd ed.), 60, 83, 102; Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1965), 247, 263; Voegelin, "Notes," 36-39.

5 [5] Voegelin, "Notes," 36-40.

First, each of the four poems is divided into five sections, or "movements," to follow Eliot's use of the analogy of a musical quartet. Analogous to development in a musical composition, in each of the poems important words and phrases recur, as do symbols and allusions, enriching their significance while altering, in retrospect, the meaning of their use in earlier contexts. This development of symbols and phrases through the poem-cycle as a whole. As themes are introduced, expanded upon, added to, repeated, and ultimately resolved, both in the individual poems and within the cycle, Eliot employs a variety of poetic voices that resemble the many voices of musical expression--phrasing either lengthy or abrupt, passages delicately hushed or firmly declarative, meandering exposition or formal repetition, simplicity of expression or elaborately dense layering of composition.

Each of the five movements has a structure similar to its counterpart in the other three poems, and both individual movements and each poem as a whole unfolds in a manner that recalls the development in a musical composition. In each of the first two movements of each poem, a set of themes is introduced, which then undergoes expansion, alteration, or embellishment in a contrasting poetic style; the poetic style shifts back and forth between a sort of discursive verse employed in a wide variety of forms, and compactly-wrought lyrical passages often dense with symbols. The third, central, movement is always concerned with the turning of the soul toward the divine--that is, with conversion, "where descent becomes ascent," as Helen Gardner puts it.⁶ [6] The fourth movement is a brief lyric which in each successive poem evokes the divine in one of four aspects: as God the Creator,⁷ [7] as the Redeemer Son, as the Lady, and

6 [6] Helen Gardner, *The Art of T. S. Eliot* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1959), 105. On the musical analogy of, and the elements of verbal music in, the *Four Quartets*, see Gardner, 1-56.

7 [7] Blamires, *Word Unheard*, 35; Voegelin, "Notes," 35.

finally as the Holy Spirit. The fifth movement of each poem recapitulates and resolves themes, developments, counterstatements and contradictions from the four preceding movements (while in three of the four poems it also includes a meditation on language itself, the poet's medium).

The *Four Quartets* are also unified by means of certain interrelated symbols or ideas associated with each of the poems. For example, the four poems are successively dominated by images of, air, earth, water, and fire, so that together they symbolize the cosmos.⁸ [8] Again, each of the *Quartets* appears to address a distinct approach to the consideration of time: *Burnt Norton* addresses time from the individual's perspective as past, present, and future, including concern for what might have been and what might come to be; *East Coker* is concerned with time as history and tradition; *The Dry Salvages* focuses on the rhythms of time, in nature and the seasons, in birth and living and dying, in preservation and destruction; and *Little Gidding* portrays time as the medium, you might say, of timelessness, and thus as the place of decision between world and God, between the unproductive fire of worldly desires and the refining fire of *amor Dei*. Further examples could be adduced, but the general point is clear: Eliot has woven the poems together, through his use of a large variety of symbols and ideas, in such a way that they may evoke as fully as possible the natural, historical, and cosmic context of a person's journey toward God.

The person whose journey is in question is, of course, anyone--as it is also, very pointedly, Eliot himself. As Voegelin states, the *Four Quartets* are a "spiritual autobiography"--just as we could say that much of Voegelin's work, especially the late work, is a spiritual

⁸ [8] Kenner , *The Invisible Poet*, 262.

autobiography.⁹ [9] But since the aim of both authors is to reveal the universal in the particular, and since what each has found in the particular is his existence in the *metaxy*, we are able to discover in Eliot's meditative journey, formulated in the incantatory medium of poetry, insights into existence and history that parallel the insights arising from Voegelin's meditative journey expressed in the medium of philosophical exegesis.

II

The first common theme, of overarching importance, is that human consciousness is the meeting-place of time and timelessness--that, as Voegelin would say, human existence is lived in the tension of the *metaxy*, the tension in between immanence and transcendence. We are indeed temporal creatures, moving along the flow of time that we characterize as a line leading from the past through the present to the future; but, as Voegelin states in his lectures on *The Drama of Humanity*, "we are not moving only on this [temporal] line, but in openness toward divine reality, so that every point of presence is as T. S. Eliot formulated it, a point of intersection of time with the timeless."¹⁰ [10] Here, as in his "Immortality" essay, Voegelin has extracted from the *Quartets* Eliot's most direct expression of existence in the *metaxy*. Early in *Burnt Norton* we hear that "To be conscious is not to be in time" (*BN* II, 84), because each moment of conscious awareness is a moment in which mere time, mere duration, is transcended through the simultaneous participation of consciousness in the being of timelessness. Then in *The Dry Salvages* we find the phrase Voegelin has extracted, the concentrated formulation of conscious existence as "The point of intersection of the timeless / With time" (*DS* V 201-202), a

⁹ [9] Voegelin, "Notes," 34.

¹⁰ [10] Eric Voegelin, "The Drama of Humanity," in Voegelin, *The Drama of Humanity*, 181.

formulation echoed later, in *Little Gidding*, where "intersection" is used in such a way as to emphasize that the timeless and spaceless divine presence is always experienced concretely by a personal consciousness in a specific time and place: "Here, the intersection of the timeless moment / Is England and nowhere. Never and always." (*LG I*, 52-53). In other words, our home is the *metaxy*, and to realize that fact is to live in awareness of the fundamental paradoxes that characterize existence in the *metaxy*: the participation of consciousness in divine presence means that we are always both somewhere and nowhere; both situated in the flux of duration and in some way beyond time's covenant, a "beyond" that can be represented, as the poet indicates, either by the word "never" or by the word "always."¹¹ [11]

The *Four Quartets* are permeated by Eliot's explorations of what we might call the logical paradoxes of existence in the *metaxy*, not merely as pertaining to the nature of consciousness, but to our vision of reality as a whole. Our experiences of divine transcendence, especially in rare moments of graced ecstasy or religious discipline, allows us to apprehend the divine *stillness* that grounds the patterned movement of all things--what Eliot calls "the dance"--which is also the divine *emptiness* that grounds all temporal and spatial substantiality. In such moments, which can then inform our lives through remembrance, we apprehend both the unity and the distinctness of the immanent and transcendent, their paradoxical interpenetration, along with our paradoxical involvement in that interpenetration, which language must strain to evoke:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;

Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,

But neither arrest nor movement. . . .

¹¹ [11] Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 16, 44, 51.

. . . Except for the point, the still point,

There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.

I can only say, *there* we have been: but I cannot say where.

And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time. (*BN* II, 62-64, 66-69)¹² [12]

The *Quartets* resonate throughout with restatements and resymbolizations of this theme, and the entire poem-cycle culminates in a lyrical affirmation (intentionally reminiscent of the conclusion of Dante's *Paradiso*) of the rightness and the mystery of the paradoxical otherness-in-unity of immanence and transcendence.

But Eliot is just as aware as Voegelin of the degree to which an explicit sense of life as existence in the in-between of immanence and transcendence is absent from modern consciousness. And when life in the *metaxy* is eclipsed, human life can only be conceived as an existence whose meaning is completely contained within nature or immanence, within the rhythms, repetitions, and inevitable defeats of temporal and material being. This is an existence whose enjoyments tend to mask, if they don't yield to, a despair that reflects that the course of time, unrelieved or unredeemed by a relation to timeless meaning, is finally a pointlessness of "rising and falling. / Eating and drinking. Dung and death." (*EC* I, 45-46). Like Voegelin, Eliot returns repeatedly in the *Quartets* to the theme of modern despair in the absence of a felt sense of participation in the timelessness of the divine. He describes "the strained, time-ridden faces" of those performing their daily tasks in a disenchanted world of the merely temporal, contingent, and mortal, and of the need, in the absence of feeling the presence of transcendent meaning, to be

¹² [12] Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 15-16.

continuously "Distracted from distraction by distraction" so as to avoid facing an underlying sense of emptiness and despair (*BN III*, 100-101).¹³ [13]

He also describes those who do feel the tug of a meaning beyond nature and its rhythms, but whose lack of belief in the truth of divine transcendence--or insufficiency of courage or humility to embrace it--leads them to seek the supra-natural somewhere *within* the universe of space and time, in the world of past and future. These are people who seek to "escape the present or the normal without proper recognition of the 'timeless'," as Harry Blamires puts it, through a wide range of occult interests and activities. Eliot presents a catalog of such activities, which function psychologically, however temporarily, as antidotes to the pointlessness of reductively temporal and material existence :

To communicate with Mars, converse with spirits,
To report the behaviour of the sea monster,
Describe the horoscope, haruspicate or scry,
Observe disease in signatures, evoke
Biography from the wrinkles of the palm
And tragedy from fingers; release omens
By sortilege, or tea leaves, riddle the inevitable
With playing cards, fiddle with pentagrams
Or barbituric acids, or dissect
The recurrent image into pre-conscious terrors--
To explore the womb, or tomb, or dreams: all these are usual
Pastimes and drugs, and features of the press:
And always will be, some of them especially
When there is distress of nations and perplexity

Whether on the shores of Asia , or in the Edgware Road . (*DS V*, 184-98)¹⁴
[14]

¹³ [13] Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 17, 51.

¹⁴ [14] Blamires, *Word Unheard*, 116; Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 43-44.

Understandably, people search for the supra-natural, because in fact we are conscious participants in such a reality; many, however, keep looking in all the wrong places.

Nevertheless most people, Eliot suggests, simply because consciousness is what it is, do have *moments* of genuine apprehension of the timeless dimension of meaning, though they typically are incapable of accurately interpreting, or incorporating into their self-understanding, the meaning of such experiences. "For most of us," Eliot writes,

. . . there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time,
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses . . .

(DS V, 206-14)¹⁵

[15]

There are indeed those rare persons--Eliot calls them saints--who manage to adjust and transform their perceptions and actions into a kind of accordance with their apprehensions of timeless meaning, to embody in the habits of their lives, in some extraordinary manner, what they have learned from their moments or visions of transcendence. But, as Hugh Kenner writes, the "typical ♦ moment in and out of time' . . . is not the saint's beatitude, but the temporary

¹⁵ [15] Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 44.

translation of that beatitude into a more familiar medium, into a mode of experience available to human kind. This is what our least time-ridden moments can give us, not timelessness but a glimpse of it . . .".¹⁶ [16] Glimpses, hints and guesses, Eliot tells us, are what most of us receive from our conscious participation in divine transcendence; but this is enough to go on, he asserts, if we wish to gain freedom from the lie of reductively temporal existence, reductive immanentism or materialism, and recover a sense of our existence in the *metaxy*. We may not be able to be saints, but we can still be human beings.

Eliot indicates throughout the *Quartets* that there are two basic paths, two directions we can take, in the attempt to learn from our glimpses of the timeless and establish a remembrance of the divine ground that keeps us aware of the *metaxy* and frees us from bondage to "mere time." We can call them the way of illumination, and the way of darkness. The first way is exemplified in the first movement of the initial poem, where Eliot recounts an unexpected moment of illuminative vision while visiting the formal garden at Burnt Norton. He is standing looking down into the drained garden pool:

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 . . .
Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.
Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children,
Hidden excitedly, containing laughter,

¹⁶ [16] Kenner , *The Invisible Poet*, 270.

Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind

Cannot bear very much reality. (BN I, 34-37, 39-43)

This is the sort of experience--of timeless grace, of joyous illumination--that can be remembered for what it has revealed, and whose recollection can shape one's orientation to living. In *East Coker*, we are again reminded of this moment in the garden and similar types of moments, sudden and unlooked-for occasions of illuminative joy, that can promote a salutary remembrance of what Blamires calls "the mystery and the meaning lying beyond the temporal order":

Whisper of running streams, and winter lightning.

The wild thyme unseen and the wild strawberry,

The laughter in the garden, echoed ecstasy . . . (EC III, 129-31)¹⁷ [17]

This is one way we can approach and recollect our relation to the divine.

Or, again, we can go by the way of darkness, of emptiness. This is the approach to remembrance of the divine by way of "Emptying the sensual with deprivation / Cleansing affection from the temporal" (BN III, 97-98). This is the descending, rather than the ascending, way, where one must "put off / Sense and notion" (LG I, 42-43) in order to meditatively seek the emptiness, the no-thing, that divinely grounds all things. In the middle movement of *Burnt Norton*, the poet advises:

Descend lower, descend only

Into the world of perpetual solitude,

World not world, but that which is not world,

¹⁷ [17] Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 14, 28.

Internal darkness, deprivation
And destitution of all property,
Desiccation of the world of sense,
Evacuation of the world of fancy,
Inoperancy of the world of spirit; (BN III, 114-21)

Eliot summarily recollects this path in the corresponding third movement of the next poem: "I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you / Which shall be the darkness of God." (EC III, 112-13).¹⁸ [18]

Both approaches to the timeless--the path of illumination or ecstasy and the path of darkness or deprivation--are equally sources of an anamnestic recovery of transcendence, and thus means of remembrance of our existence in the *metaxy*.¹⁹ [19] Their recurrent descriptions and juxtapositions as a central theme of the poem-cycle suggest why Eliot chose as one of his two epigraphs for the *Four Quartets* the famous dictum of Heraclitus: "The way up and the way down are one and the same" (Diels, Fr. 60).

If we remain sufficiently aware of the *metaxy*, Eliot indicates, then we shall come to understand in a manner rather different than the usual how meaning accrues to personal existence. As typical moderns, we tend to imagine life's meaning as an accretion of experience and knowledge during the process of growth in time, so that the point and purpose of a life *is* its

¹⁸ [18] Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 17, 18, 27, 50.

¹⁹ [19] Eliot alludes to a number of religious and philosophical authors and traditions, and uses direct quotations from the mystics St. John of the Cross and Julian of Norwich, in his elaboration of these approaches to the timelessness of divine being.

development in time, heading toward the ripeness of maturity and the (hoped-for) wisdom of late years. But in remembering that at every point of presence in time we participate in the timeless meaning of the divine ground, we discover that existence is not *primarily* a matter of temporal fulfilments, or of growing toward rounded or completed meaning in time. Remembering our involvement in divine timelessness, we recognize that the divinely intended meaning of our existence is not, in its deepest significance, a journey through the world of time toward its mortal end, but a journey of coming to discover and respond to our participation in the timeless--a journey toward God, structured from its beginning as a search for God. Then we see that our special moments of glimpses and hints, our "moments in and out of time," are, and ought to consciously remain, the crucially revealing elements concerning our life's meaning.

Understanding this, we can also recognize that we are never, whatever our stage in life, other than in "the middle" of existence--that is, in the in-between of the *metaxy*. This is a truth ever in danger of being ignored or forgotten through our being distracted by personal and worldly desire and every temptation that cultures of hedonism and immanentism can offer, a situation marvelously symbolized by Eliot in declaring that we are

In the middle, not only in the middle of the way

But all the way, in a dark wood, in a bramble,

On the edge of a grimpen, where is no secure foothold,

And menaced by monsters, fancy lights,

Risking enchantment.

(*EC II*, 89-93)²⁰ [20]

²⁰ [20] Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 26.

Dante's crisis-moment of finding himself lost at the midpoint of his life is transformed by Eliot into a reminder of the difficulty and need of recollecting our life in the *metaxy* in our own age of distinctively modern dangers and enchantments.

Our task is to keep our balance--what Voegelin calls the "balance of consciousness"--where we neither allow the timeless dimension of meaning to be forgotten (the typically modern problem), nor let our awareness of timeless reality so fascinate us that we either devalue our life in time or disregard the significance of our own concrete biographical circumstances.²¹ [21] As Voegelin remarks in his "Notes" on the *Quartets*, a "spiritual autobiography is the history of a spirit joined to body, and the body lives in the here and now of a definite locale."²² [22] Eliot's grounding of the *Quartets* in the geographical and biographical details of his own experiences and in his family's history, including constant references to what are clearly authors and texts, encounters and events, that hold special meaning for the poet, underscore the fact that the journey to God is always undertaken as the unique journey of a concrete person in concrete places and times, facing uniquely personal challenges and opportunities. We must not fall under the illusion that reality is the temporal realm alone, but we also mustn't forget that it is only through our life in time, with all its suffering and joy, its hopes and uncertainties, and its use of memory and forethought, that we are granted access to the timeless. Our life in time is the

21 [21] On Voegelin's notion of "the balance of consciousness," see Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 4, *The Ecumenic Age*, ed. Michael Franz, vol. 17 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia, Mo: University of Missouri Press, 2000), chap. 4, ¶ 3, "The Balance of Consciousness" (291-302); for further explication, see Glenn Hughes, "Balanced and Imbalanced Consciousness," in Hughes, ed., *The Politics of the Soul: Eric Voegelin on Religious Experience* (Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 163-83.

22 [22] Voegelin, "Notes," 36.

condition by which we have been graced with the opportunity to seek our true end, the timeless "ground of our beseeching" (*LG* III, 199). As Eliot states in *Burnt Norton*:

To be conscious is not to be in time
But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,
The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,
The moment in the draughty church at smokefall
Be remembered; involved with past and future.
Only through time time is conquered. (BN II, 84-89)²³ [23]

III

Our second and third themes, the common visions of Eliot and Voegelin regarding, first, the *metaxic* structure of history, and second, the transcendent ground of history whose most differentiated symbolization is the Christian God, can each be treated more briefly.

Though *Four Quartets* is, as Helen Gardner writes, most simply described as "a series of meditations upon existence in time," it thereby necessarily includes meditation on the meaning and structure of history.²⁴ [24] Through his understanding of incarnate human consciousness as participating in the timeless meaning of divine being, Eliot draws the conclusion that history is improperly conceived of as being principally a process of chronological development. He

²³ [23] Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 16, 57.

²⁴ [24] Gardner, *The Art of T. S. Eliot*, 44.

describes how a quite different conception of history makes itself apparent through persistent meditation on consciousness as the intersection of time and timelessness:

It seems, as one becomes older,
That the past has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere sequence--
Or even development: the latter a partial fallacy
Encouraged by superficial notions of evolution,
Which becomes, in the popular mind, a means of disowning the past.

(DS II, 85-89)²⁵ [25]

When we take seriously that human consciousness is existence in the participatory tension between immanence and transcendence, the notion of history as *essentially* a sequence or development must be replaced by a more complex image. Voegelin, in his Introduction to *The Ecumenic Age*, suggests the image of "a web of meaning" constituted by many lines or patterns of meaning as these have "revealed themselves in the self-interpretation of persons and societies in history," and the most important of which he refers to as the line of meaning "that runs from time into eternity."²⁶ [26] In a similar way, Eliot gradually draws forth in the *Quartets* an idea of history as a process that takes its most fundamental meaning from the pattern established by human experiences of timelessness, which have revealed the significance of life as a journey toward God. So, Eliot concludes, we may best describe history as "a pattern of timeless

²⁵ [25] Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 39.

²⁶ [26] Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 47, 106.

moments," understanding that history is ultimately affected by every act of conscious human participation in the divine ground.²⁷ [27]

The essential purpose of this pattern will have been most clearly revealed by those whose response to the divine presence in consciousness has led to the fullest actualizations of personal response to and attunement with the timeless being of the divine. This is what Eliot means by saying that

to apprehend

The point of intersection of the timeless

With time is an occupation for the saint--

No occupation either, but something given

And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,

Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender. (DS V, 200-205)

Most of us have our glimpses, our hints and guesses, but the saints, and especially the saint of saints, have revealed the mystery of history's meaning most completely:

The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.

Here the impossible union

Of spheres of existence is actual,

Here the past and future

²⁷ [27] Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 58. Regarding this point, Voegelin comments: "On this conception of a divine presence, which is the presence of every present point on the [temporal] line, depends every conception of history that makes sense, every sense of history at all." Voegelin, "The Drama of Humanity," 181.

Are conquered, and reconciled . . .

(DS V, 215-19)28 [28]

Though Eliot nowhere mentions the name of Christ in the *Quartets*, the capitalization here of "Incarnation" indicates his Christian understanding of Jesus as the person to have most fully actualized human realization of the divine presence in consciousness, and thus to have revealed most fully our human condition and calling, as well as history's ultimate orientation, throughout its *metaxic* unfolding, toward the divine unity. This is perfectly harmonious, I believe, with Voegelin's understanding of the meaning and impact of the Christian epiphany and its role in the unfolding revelation of the mystery of history.

Voegelin's approving reference, in one of his late writings, to Eliot's "postspeculative, mystical meditation on history" in the *Quartets* confirms, I think, his appreciation of Eliot's grasp of the fact that all modern notions of history as merely a sequence or line of development are linked to progressivist conceptions, either liberal or utopian, that are shallow and misleading.²⁹ [29] If we were to think of history as "mere temporal succession," and to do so in a realistic way, we would see life in mere time for what it is: an endless rhythm of birth and aging and death, worldly success and failure, rising and falling, pleasure and suffering, without end, without point. We would recognize not only the past but also the future as "a faded song"; we would accept "that time is no healer" (DS III, 126, 131). This recognition is the basis of the great lament, in sestina form, that makes up the first section of the second movement of *The Dry Salvages*, where

28 [28] Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 44.

29 [29] Eric Voegelin, "On Henry James's *Turn of the Screw*," in Voegelin, *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, 155. The comment occurs in the "Postscript" of the essay, written in 1970.

the poet proclaims the futility of seeking a *telos* for human striving and human destiny in the world of time alone:

Where is there an end of it, the soundless wailing,
The silent withering of autumn flowers
Dropping their petals and remaining motionless;
Where is there an end to the drifting wreckage . . .

There is no end, but addition: the trailing
Consequence of further days and hours,
While emotion takes to itself the emotionless
Years of living among the breakage
Of what was believed in as the most reliable . . .

We cannot think of a time that is oceanless
Or of an ocean not littered with wastage
Or of a future that is not liable

Like the past, to have no destination. (DS II, 49-52, 55-59, 69-72)³⁰ [30]

The true *telos* of history, as of the individual, concerns the orientation of individuals and peoples in time toward the mystery of fulfilment in the timeless. As Helen Gardner succinctly states:

³⁰ [30] Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 37-38, 40, 41. In line 56, the printed "consequence" has been given a capital "C," correcting an obvious error in this edition.

"The only *end* [purpose, *telos*] to the flux of history is man's response to the eternal manifesting itself in time."³¹ [31]

Thus we are misleading ourselves if we consider our ultimate aim as persons in terms of progress toward temporal well-being or fulfillment. Our elemental purpose is to continue to strive more fully to realize our participation in timeless being. This is why Eliot (elaborating on a theme from the Bhagavad-Gita) urges the reader to "consider the future / And the past with an equal mind," and to "not think of the fruit of action" in this world, but rather to "Fare forward": "Not fare *well*, / But fare forward, voyagers." (*DS* III, 153-54, 161, 168). As Voegelin comments in his "Notes": this imperative of "emigration" is "a symbol for a beyond of history." However old we may be, whatever our state of satisfaction or suffering, we can fare forward in loving response to the divine being revealed in our apprehensions of, and disciplined attention to, timeless meaning. Not just the enthusiastic young, not just those of middle years, but even

Old men ought to be explorers

Here and there does not matter

We must be still and still moving

Into another intensity

For a further union, a deeper communion . . . (EC V, 202-206)

³¹ [31] Gardner, *The Art of T. S. Eliot*, 172. Thus in *Little Gidding*, Eliot writes: "History may be servitude, / History may be freedom" (LG III, 162-63). It is servitude to those whose participation in temporal duration is imaginatively constrained by their sense of existence as restricted to and bound within the causes and forces of nature and the inheritance, impact, and future of society; it is freedom for those who experience existence as life in the *metaxy*, and who are thus liberated from the intrinsically pointless succession of natural and social processes through their recognition of, and search for attunement with, timeless divine being. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 55.

This is the voyage that counts,

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time. (LG V, 240-42)³² [32]

Existence in the personal and historical *metaxy* is a journey that, properly fulfilled, ends in the discovery that the essence of the self is the divine love that had created and drawn the seeking soul toward itself from the beginning.

IV

True to Christian understanding, the *Quartets* affirm the ground of being to be transcendent divine love, itself beyond time and desiring, that nonetheless suffers manifestation as desire in the divinely caused movement of creaturely longing and love:

Love is itself unmoving,

Only the cause and end of movement,

Timeless, and undesiring

Except in the aspect of time

Caught in the form of limitation

Between un-being and being. (BN V, 163-68)

³² [32] Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 32, 42, 59 (emphasis added); Voegelin, "Notes," 38.

Human consciousness is where finite reality participates *knowingly* in this divine love, the place where immanent being is *directly* permeable, given human openness and response, by divine love in action. Thus "Love is most nearly itself / When here and now cease to matter" (*EC* V, 200-201)--that is, as human perception, intention, and action is increasingly self-transcending and unrestricted in its loving, it is increasingly transparent for the absolutely unrestricted act of love that is the Christian God.³³ [33]

But the vision of timeless, divine reality in the *Quartets* is not at all one of Christian exclusivism. It is a vision, rather, that is profoundly ecumenic and universalist. Eliot is almost always identified as a Christian writer in the narrow sense, and some of his poetry and a good deal of his prose reinforces that identification. But although Christian vision and tradition are central to the *Four Quartets*--especially in its reliance on the symbol of Incarnation, in its lyrical evocations in its respective fourth movements of the divine persons of Creator, Son, Virgin, and Spirit, and in its explicit use of the symbols and sayings of such Christian predecessors as Dante, St. John of the Cross and Julian of Norwich--this most profound of Eliot's visions as a religious thinker nevertheless breaks open the horizon of universal religious experience just as fully as does Voegelin's philosophical treatment of human-divine existence in the *metaxy*. Beyond its Christian dimension of symbolization, the poems of the *Quartets* draw explicitly from Buddhist, Hindu, and Platonic or Neoplatonist traditions and language, and its evocation of mystical and meditative experiences is clearly intended to suggest a global range of references.

What seems obvious is that Eliot wanted to speak in the *Quartets* to the *universal* experience of human existence as situated in the in-between of time and timelessness, and knew

³³ [33] Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 20, 31.

that he could do so only through a poetic language that both avoided a deliberately liturgical use of Christian language and also employed a universal range of symbolic articulations of divine-human encounter. He is writing of *every* person's existence and participation in history.

Therefore he must build the poem on the basis of experiences recognizable to any open mind, and then show, through the employment and correlation of symbols and phrases from a multitude of religious traditions, how these speak to and illuminate such experiences. Thus, as Helen Gardner states, throughout the poem-cycle Eliot's "use of specifically religious words and symbols shows a scrupulous care."³⁴ [34] Whether Buddhist ("lotos," "detachment"), Hindu ("I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant--"), Christian ("the Word in the desert," "Adam's curse,"), or mystical-philosophical ("the still point of the turning world"), the religious language is always illustrative of universally available experiences. And beyond this, Eliot in certain passages--especially in the beginning of *The Dry Salvages*--shows sensitivity to the cosmological experience of divine presence in the world ("I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river / Is a strong brown god," . . . "The sea has many voices, / Many gods and

34 [34] Gardner, *The Art of T. S. Eliot*, 62. Eugene Webb addresses well this accessibility of Eliot's religious language in the *Quartets*: "The poems of *Four Quartets*, . . . besides developing to full maturity [Eliot's] religious vision, were also an important step forward for him in the development of a poetic language with which to communicate his vision to a large audience on the basis of a common culture. Instead of employing allusions to relatively unfamiliar parts of the Bible, the quartets draw on Biblical imagery that would be recognizable to almost any educated reader . . . And when he alludes to relatively less familiar material, such as the *Bhagavad Gita* or the writings of Saint John of the Cross, it is not necessary to know his sources because their meaning is made clear in the poem." Eugene Webb, "The Way Up and the Way Down: The Redemption of Time in T. S. Eliot's ♦Ash Wednesday' and *Four Quartets*," in Webb, *The Dark Dove: The Sacred and Secular in Modern Literature* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), 220-21. The section on *Four Quartets* in Webb's essay provides an excellent brief introduction to the themes and overall meanings in the poem. As for book-length treatments, the most comprehensive and detailed analysis that I have discovered so far is Blamires, *Word Unheard*, although Blamires does not, in my view, give proper due to the work's religious ecumenism.

many voices") (*DS* I, 1-2, 24-25).³⁵ [35] The religious language of the *Quartets* can be said, I believe, to be an attempt at reclaiming, for modernity, a sense of the ultimate unity of individual, world, society, and history through their participation in the one divine ground, a participatory sense that has evoked articulations throughout the world's regions and religions, both ancient and modern, of reality as grounded in a timeless unity.³⁶ [36]

David Tracy has recently emphasized such a view of the *Quartets*, underscoring Eliot's intention to create a poem of spiritual truth with full ecumenical reach, a modern (indeed modernist) poem of recovery and restatement for our own age. Tracy judges both that Eliot accomplished his aim, and that few readers grasp just how radically ecumenic is Eliot's spiritual vision in the *Quartets*:

Eliot, as both poet and religious thinker, went as far as any twentieth-century poet in the English-speaking world has ever done to evoke and provoke both ancient and new, both Eastern and Western religious spiritual thinking. . . . Thus does Eliot of the *Quartets* leave the Eliot of the controversial essays on Christianity far behind to join himself to the tradition of marginal Christian Platonist thinkers from Dionysius through Eckhart. This Platonic legacy is intensified rather than lessened when Eliot turns to the more explicitly Christian images of the later *Quartets*, for all the *Quartets* are pervaded by moments displaying [a religion] of manifestation and meditation. . . . In the later *Quartets* ("Little Gidding" V) Eliot's religious thought, in its now

35 [35] Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 35, 36.

36 [36] Regarding this sense of participatory unity, it is tempting to identify the sequence of poems in the *Quartets*, thematically, with the four constitutive elements in Voegelin's "primordial community of being"--God, man, world, and society--discussed at the beginning of *Order and History*. *Burnt Norton* focuses on the individual, the poet Eliot, reflecting on specific actions pertaining to his concrete presence in a concrete place in England ("man"); *East Coker* reflects the social world of community and heritage ("society"); *The Dry Salvages* relies on evocations of the world of nature, its rhythms and powers, and worldly cycles ("world"); *Little Gidding*, the hallowed place of religious community, of monks and contemplation of an ultimate reconciliation of history in a beyond of history, is most distinctively the poem of "God." On the "primordial community of being" with its "quaternarian structure," see Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 1, *Israel and Revelation*, ed. Maurice P. Hogan, vol. 14 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia, Mo: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 39ff.

explicitly Christian form, sometimes transforms itself into some vision just as puzzling and radical as that pervading the central images of "Burnt Norton" (the Buddhist imagery of the lotus and the pool and the Heraclitean-Platonist imagery of the still point.)

In *Four Quartets*, Tracy firmly concludes, "multiplicity of the religious vision, not exclusivity, reigns."³⁷ [37] This does not mean that Voegelin was wrong when, in his "Notes" on the *Quartets*, he called them "the spiritual autobiography of a Christian poet." But it would be equally true to call the *Quartets* the work of a poet of divine presence, in a manner similar to what is meant when Voegelin is described as a philosopher of divine presence.³⁸ [38]

In the end, the "Christian" character of the *Quartets*, and its use of Christian together with equivalent symbolisms of human-divine encounter, call to mind the approach to Christianity in Voegelin's philosophical work. In both the latter and in Eliot's poem-cycle, there is an insistence on divine presence as co-constitutive of humanity universally; an emphasis on spiritual meditation and mystical apprehension as necessary experiential conditions for attaining a sound understanding and vision of existence and history; and an agreement that the fullest differentiation of human understanding of divine transcendence, and its implications for the meaning of personal existence and of human history, is to be found in the realm of Christian experience and symbolization and their historical unfolding and explication. Indeed the *Quartets*

³⁷ [37] See David Tracy, "T. S. Eliot as Religious Thinker: *Four Quartets*," in Todd Breyfogle, ed., *Literary Imagination, Ancient and Modern: Essays in Honor of David Grene* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 269-84 (272, 275, 283).

³⁸ [38] Voegelin, "Notes," 34. On this characterization of Voegelin, see Paul Caringella, "Voegelin: Philosopher of Divine Presence," in Ellis Sandoz, ed., *Eric Voegelin's Significance for the Modern Mind* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 174-205.

rather forcefully remind one of Voegelin's remarks on Christ and Christianity in his "Response to Professor Altizer":

I am indeed attempting to "identify" . . . the God who reveals himself, not only in the prophets, in Christ, and in the apostles, but wherever his reality is experienced as present in the cosmos and in the soul of man. . . . The modern enlargement of the ecumenic horizon to globality, and of the temporal horizon by the archeological millennia, has made a revision of the traditional "common language" indeed ineluctable. . . . [My expansion of the Anselmian *faith seeking understanding*] to all the experiences of divine reality in which history constitutes itself, cannot be said to go beyond "Christianity." For it is the Christ of the Gospel of John who says of himself: "Before Abraham was, I am" (8:58); and it is Thomas Aquinas who considers the Christ to be the head of the *corpus mysticum* that embraces, not only Christians, but all mankind from the creation of the world to its end. In practice this means that one has to recognize, and make intelligible, the presence of Christ in a Babylonian hymn, or a Taoist speculation, or a Platonic dialogue, just as much as in a Gospel.³⁹ [39]

And finally, Eliot's expression in the *Quartets* of his awareness that his own lifetime's search for meaningful existence was from the start a response to the initiatory, loving appeal of the divine ground--approaching the end of the final poem, we are presented with the isolated line and summarizing utterance, "With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling" (LG V, 238)⁴⁰ [40] --has its counterpart in Voegelin's repeated reminder that any person's search after meaning and purpose in life is from the first and always a simultaneous "being drawn" by the divine ground. Restless human questioning is *de facto* a participatory response to the divine ground of our being, which draws us toward truth and goodness and love--however faithful to the normative orientation and unrestricted reach of this questioning we may prove to be.

39 [39] Eric Voegelin, "Response to Professor Altizer's ♦A New History and a New but Ancient God?'," in Voegelin, *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, 293-94.

40 [40] A quotation from the anonymous medieval work of mysticism, *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

V

By focusing solely on three selected themes related to the illumination of human existence as life in the in-between of time and timelessness, much of the riches of the *Four Quartets*, as well as additional close correspondences with Voegelin's concerns and conclusions, have remained unexamined.⁴¹ [41] But enough has been presented, I hope, to reveal a profound sympathy between the two writers in their vision of the human situation in the *metaxy*, as well as in their resistance to those elements of modernity that, in denying and eclipsing the truth of timeless being, have assisted both in provoking the *ennui* and *angst* for which the twentieth century is so famous and in giving birth to recent political nightmares founded on the illusion of radically immanentist existence. Though consciousness is in truth the point of the intersection of the timeless with time, far too many in the modern world, in Eliot's words, have "had the experience but missed the meaning" (*DS* II, 93).⁴² [42] Voegelin and Eliot alike want to recover the meaning in the experience, and to evoke it through their writings as eloquently and convincingly as possible.

Both writers make clear that this recovery of the truth of existence in the *metaxy* can be achieved only on the basis of two essential, interconnected processes. The first of these is personal engagement in meditative and spiritual disciplines that enable the soul to explore its own depths with sufficient humility, courage and faith to overcome the fear "[o]f belonging . . .

⁴¹ [41] For example, Eliot's meditations on language in three of the *Quartets* are poetic counterparts to Voegelin's discussions of 1) the existential struggle to recover the underlying meaning of key symbols that have shaped tradition, 2) the cultural importance of a precise use of language that speaks truth to the present age, and 3) the final inadequacies of language itself.

⁴² [42] Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 39.

to God," and so to find at the center of oneself that which is, paradoxically, both not-self and yet the essential self: "the still point of the turning world" (*EC* II, 96, *BN* IV, 136).⁴³ [43] The second process is to study with loving attention the great thinkers and writers of the past, the philosophers and prophets and saints and poets, and to struggle to restore and restate their insights and wisdom in a way that speaks to the present. Voegelin's achievements in both processes is strikingly manifest, but a remarkable degree of achievement is also clear in the Eliot of the *Quartets*, where, in David Tracy's words, we find how a "twentieth century poetics of the spirit informed . . . by an enormous range of Western and non-Western religious and philosophical ideas can be rendered plausible for any honest and open mind."⁴⁴ [44] The spiritual autobiographies of the *Four Quartets* and of Voegelin's mature works, then, can both be viewed as bulwarks against the disorders and distractions of our time, as they recover for us with sublime articulacy the truth of our lives in the in-between of temporal and timeless meaning.

⁴³ [43] Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 18, 27.

⁴⁴ [44] Tracy, "T. S. Eliot as Religious Thinker," 270.