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Four Quartets as Poetry of Place

One thinks of *Four Quartets* preeminently as a religious and philosophical poem; yet its argument does not proceed simply or preeminently on an abstract level. Rather, ideas enter our consciousness and our understanding through felt experience. Whether it be the paradox of the still point, the mystical negative way of illumination, the attitude of humility, the nature of time, the relationship of attachment, detachment, indifference and history, the necessity for atonement, or any of the other difficult ideas Eliot argues, the poetry leads us into a full experience of concepts by grounding them in places. Thus, we know the still point primarily through our vision in the rose-garden of Burnt Norton; the negative way of illumination is presented spatially as a descent into the darkness beneath the level of the London underground; the attitude of humility is derived out of the atmosphere of death that pervades East Coker; the nature of time is seen through our experience of the river and the sea; the thorny relationship of attachment, detachment, indifference and history is argued through the paradigm of the nettles on the hedgerow of Little Gidding; and the necessity for atonement arises from our experience of the tongues of fire that descend on wartime London. Even the primary religious concept of the *Quartets*, the Incarnation, is not fully argued in conceptual terms until three-quarters of the way through the poem, at the end of *The Dry Salvages*. Long before that, however, its mystery is revealed to us in particular moments of illumination that transpire in time and also in place. This is the primary paradox of the poem, on which all the others are founded—that the Word, which is beyond space and time, should be known to us in time and also through place. The paradox of Incarnation is one we encounter repeatedly in the *Quartets* from the first moment of vision in the rose-garden to the final image of union in the rose and the fire; and the argument of the poem as a whole is grounded in our

experience of these illuminations, which all transpire in actual places and derive their sensuous particulars from those places. Thus, Eliot's use of place to ground the abstract argument of the *Quartets* in felt experience affects the nature of the poetry in a most fundamental way.

I propose to explore two aspects of Eliot's use of place. There is first the crucial structural function of place in each of the *Quartets*. Each poem takes its title from a place and is framed around the poet's experience of that place, with meditations and lyrics unfolding from the primary experience and returning to it in the end. The structural importance of place suggests that *Four Quartets* may be aligned and profitably compared with the great Romantic poems also framed around places—the genre M.H. Abrams has named the greater Romantic lyric.¹ The body of this paper will pursue such a comparison in an attempt to show that *Four Quartets* stands squarely in the tradition of English romantic landscape poetry. Prefatory to this, I shall consider the development of Eliot's treatment of place in the poetry preceding *Four Quartets*. In the *Quartets*, the poetic landscapes are all derived from actual places, and they are realized in the poetry with such particularity as to make their reality an essential part of the poetic experience. Eliot's method here involves a considerable departure from his earlier practice, where generalized and imaginative landscapes predominated. The crucial point of change came after *Ash Wednesday*, when Eliot modified his sense of the natural world of time and space as fallen and unredeemable, and grew into the conviction that place and time contain and reveal the Word. As we shall see, this adjustment in Eliot's views enlarged the resources of subject that he could draw upon in *Four Quartets*, and significantly altered the shape of the poetry itself.

If we begin, then, by considering the kind of landscapes that predominate in *Ash Wednesday* and the poetry preceding it, we will find powerful symbolic landscapes framed from personal, literary, and mythical sources. The desert landscape that pervades part V of *The Waste Land* is typical:

Here is no water but only rock
 Rock and no water and the sandy road
 The road winding above among the mountains
 Which are mountains of rock without water
 If there were water we should stop and drink
 Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think
 Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand
 If there were only water amongst the rock

Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit
 Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit
 There is not even silence in the mountains
 But dry sterile thunder without rain
 There is not even solitude in the mountains
 But red sullen faces sneer and snarl
 From doors of mudcracked houses.³

This is not a landscape from Eliot's personal experience, recalled in all its individual detail and presented in the poem as an actual place. The details here are not to be read as literal, but as metaphorical; they are representative of a state of the soul and are derived from Biblical and mythical associations with water, rock, and desert. The same is true of many of the other landscapes in *The Waste Land*—the garden of the Hyacinth girl, the sea of Phlebas the Phoenician, and even to some extent the city, which is ultimately the "Unreal City" of all Europe. (The last paragraph of part I and the whole of part III are the major exceptions here, dominated as they are by details from London and the Thames.)⁴

Similarly in *The Hollow Men*, landscape functions through generalized detail to define a state of mind; the hollow men exist in "death's dream kingdom", a place figured in various emblematic images: "dry cellar", "dead land", "cactus land", "hollow valley", "this beach of the tumid river", and so on (pp. 89-92). Again in *Ash Wednesday*, the speaker's vision of the Lady frames her in a landscape that is symbolic rather than realistic. Indeed, the phrase "dream kingdom" from *The Hollow Men* might best describe the nature of this landscape, for it is very like a dream landscape in its spare but intense details:

Under a juniper-tree the bones sand, scattered and shining
 We are glad to be scattered, we did little good to each other,
 Under a tree in the cool of the day, with the blessing of sand,
 Forgetting themselves and each other, united
 In the quiet of the desert. This is the land which ye
 Shall divide by lot. And neither division nor unity
 Matters. This is the land. We have our inheritance. (p. 98)

And later in part IV, the yew trees, the garden god, the fountains and the bird, the unicorns, the last blue rocks, and the garden in the desert are all details to be read as part of "the higher dream", as Eliot calls it, which he was imitating from the *Paradiso*, whose pageantry of imagined images Eliot contrasted with the "low dream" and the lesser imaginative

capabilities of the modern mind.⁵ The landscape of the stairs that fills part III is also based on imagined details, intended to figure forth the inner landscape of the soul. Much the same could be said of the landscapes of *Prufrock* and *Gerontion* as well. All these poems are set primarily in landscapes of imagination, formed from traditional concepts, archetypal images, literary backgrounds, and private thought. With perhaps the single exception of London in *The Waste Land*, they are presented in the poetry as metaphorical rather than literal.

Another unmistakable landscape from actuality does occur, however, among these poems; in the last section of *Ash Wednesday*, powerful memories of the New England seascape flood the poet's consciousness and distract him from his resolve to ascend the ladder of renunciation:

(Bless me father) though I do not wish to wish these things
 From the wide window towards the granite shore
 The white sails still fly seaward, seaward flying
 Unbroken wings
 And the lost heart stiffens and rejoices
 In the lost lilac and the lost sea voices
 And the weak spirit quickens to rebel
 For the bent golden-rod and the lost sea smell
 Quickens to recover
 The cry of quail and the whirling plover
 And the blind eye creates
 The empty forms between the ivory gates
 And smell renews the salt savour of the sandy earth. (p. 104)

This is an actual landscape, remembered from the poet's childhood in all its particular and distinguishing detail. Here are all the realities of sight, sound, and smell (the granite shore, the white sail, the lilac and the golden rod, the quail, the plover, the sea smell, and the sandy earth) that characterize this place and mark it as a specific locale. This landscape stands apart from the other landscapes in the poem and affects us in a different way; it is a landscape from experience, recalled with longing and presented with a sense of its beauty and integrity as a real place. Even though it must be renounced in the end, it leaves a lasting imprint on poet and reader alike.

In the context of *Ash Wednesday* this landscape of natural beauty presents itself as a distraction from the task at hand and is therefore a force to be renounced. There is nothing evil about this place; but the sights and sounds here for which the heart quickens to rebel represent man's natural desire to assert the realities of the senses. Compared with

the life of the spirit, these realities are like the "empty forms" that come from the "ivory gates" of false dreams, and they must be disowned in the effort to achieve that higher perfection of finding "Our peace in His will" (p. 105). In *Ash Wednesday*, the speaker feels that no physical landscape can help in his search to actualize and experience the reality of the Word. This is the most fundamental difference between *Ash Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*. In *Four Quartets*, the Word is present everywhere, and experienced through illumination rooted in earthly places. Symbolic landscapes give way for the most part to landscapes of actuality; for what is actual in time and place is now seen to be intersected with eternity and the timeless reality of God. This is a significant development in Eliot's thought, significant too for the kind of poetry it enabled him to write. For it allowed him to use all the resources of actual places and remembered experiences in a positive context. As a result, *Four Quartets* does not deny, but rather accepts and celebrates, man's emotional ties with the beauty of the earth; and this is one of the poem's great strengths.

In *Ash Wednesday*, the speaker argues the impossibility of realizing the Word in time and place. The word is "unspoken" and "unheard", and the speaker laments:

Where shall the word be found, where will the word
Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence
Not on the sea or on the islands, not
On the mainland, in the desert or the rain land,
For those who walk in darkness
Both in the day time and in the night time
The right time and the right place are not here
No place of grace for those who avoid the face
No time to rejoice for those who walk among noise and
deny the voice. (p. 102)

He knows he must search elsewhere for the Word, for time and place cannot encompass a reality that is limitless in all ways:

Because I know that time is always time
And place is always and only place
And what is actual is actual only for one time
And only for one place. (p. 95)

Because time is "always time" and place is "always and only place", they seem to be of no real value in the search. The beautiful seascape that is recalled so longingly at the end must be renounced as an empty

form; and the poet must turn back to the landscape of his inner struggle ("The place of solitude where three dreams cross/between blue rocks," p. 104) to find his peace there.

In *Four Quartets*, no earthly place is an "empty form", except perhaps for the place of disaffection in *Burnt Norton* III, the twilight realm of the London underground that satisfies neither by the fullness of light nor by the deprivation of darkness. In Eliot's new vision, place and time are redeemed by the presence of the incarnate Word, revealed to us in diverse forms and to varying degrees of clarity. Perhaps because Eliot is able at this point to accept a vision that is less than complete, he finds the earth full of hints and guesses of the Incarnation. "Where shall the word be found, where will the word/Resound?" he asks in *Ash Wednesday*. "Quick now, here, now, always" is his answer in *Four Quartets* (p. 195), whereas the answer in *Ash Wednesday* was quite the antithesis: "Not here . . . /Not on the sea or on the islands, not/On the mainland, in the desert or the rainland" (p. 102). In *Four Quartets*, all these places support the "life of significant soil" (p. 213), and ordinary men are graced with moments of illumination which, though they be only hints and guesses, half understood, are genuine mystical visions of ultimate realities. The lament in *Ash Wednesday* that "no place of grace" exists to actualize the divine changes in *Four Quartets* to a celebration of the two ways to find and know the Word—the one way still negative as in *Ash Wednesday*, through the arduous path of denial, but the other way a joyful and immediate knowledge of grace within the bodily forms of earthly beauty. Whereas in *Ash Wednesday*, the speaker suggests that "time is always time" and "place is always and only place" and "what is actual is actual only for one time / And only for one place" (p. 95), *Four Quartets* is founded on the belief that time and place are not always and only themselves, but are intersected with a force beyond them and unlimited by them. It is because the Incarnation stands at the very centre of Eliot's vision in *Four Quartets*, that time and place are framed in the light of redemption and are available as instruments for both spiritual enlightenment and poetic method.

This development in Eliot's thinking was not slow in coming after *Ash Wednesday*. Already in *Marina* (1930), we see Eliot using the seascape of *Ash Wednesday* VI in a new way. Here discovery of place serves as a symbol of awakening into a heightened awareness of reality. The beautiful natural imagery indigenous to the landscape gives substance to the king's discovery of beatitude:

What seas what shores what grey rocks and what islands
 What water lapping the bow
 And scent of pine and the woodthrush singing through the fog
 What images return

O my daughter. (p.115)

Eliot's new conception of place and time is epitomized in the king's description of his new awareness; death, he says, is "become unsubstantial, reduced by a wind, / A breath of pine, and the woodsong fog / By this grace dissolved in place" (p. 115). The phrase "this grace dissolved in place" might serve as an epigraph to any discussion of Eliot's use of place in *Four Quartets*.

In the five *Landscapes* of 1934-1935, Eliot perfected his ability to accomplish brief but intense evocations of place. Each of these poems is grounded in an actual landscape, capturing the feeling of the place in a few short strokes. "Rannoch, by Glencoe" depicts the landscape where the MacDonalDs were massacred by the Campbells and the English in 1692; the descriptive details are all chosen to render the atmosphere of hatred and death that still invests the place. "Usk" captures the aura of enchantment in a Welsh landscape, and "Cape Ann" imitates the energy and sounds of the birds that inhabit that area of New England. In "Virginia", Eliot works mainly through incantation to create a sense of the red river as a force that embodies both stillness and movement, and an unfathomable kind of will. "New Hampshire", perhaps the most complex of these poems, realizes some of the paradoxes inherent in the landscape of an apple orchard filled with birds and children. Blossom and fruit time, green tip and root, black wing and golden head, grief and joy are united through the landscape, and in it death and life are seen as one. As exercises in realizing various landscapes with delicacy and concision, these poems are crucial precursors to Eliot's technique in *Four Quartets*.

In *Four Quartets*, Eliot did more than render actual places with a full sense of their atmosphere and detail. He yoked the experience of place to an extended structure of meditations and lyrics in such a way that the concepts of meditation and the imagery of lyric verse spring out of the landscapes of the poem. In shaping *Four Quartets* around particular places, he was writing in the tradition of the great lyric and conversational poems of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley. The remainder of this paper will attempt to examine some of the important facets of this connection.

The genre that M.H. Abrams has named the greater Romantic Lyric includes many of the Romantics' finest meditative poems — Coleridge's "The Eolian Harp", "Frost at Midnight", "The Nightingale", "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison", Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey", Shelley's "Mont Blanc", etc. As Abrams observes, "For several decades poets did not often talk about the great issues of life, death, love, joy, dejection, or God without talking at the same time about the landscape." The immediate antecedent of the greater Romantic lyric was the locodescriptive poem of the eighteenth century, a genre initiated as early as 1642 by Sir John Denham's "Cooper's Hill". Eliot himself has described this earlier mode of landscape poetry:

"Cooper's Hill" had . . . a distinct influence in forming a popular type of meditative poetry . . . (The poem) set the model for a succession of didactic or meditative monologues suggested by the contemplation of natural scenery. In most of them, as in "Cooper's Hill," the importance of the view or scenery contemplated is slight; for Denham it is merely the starting point for a succession of common-place but well phrased reflections.⁷

As the form evolved, the emphasis was placed more upon the personal emotions and thoughts of the particular speaker, as for instance, in Gray's "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College". But as Abrams shows, the greater Romantic lyric was characterized even more by "the free flow of consciousness, the interweaving of thought, feeling, and perceptual detail, and the easy naturalness of the speaking voice."⁸ In these characteristics, *Four Quartets* is very closely allied to the form of its distinguished Romantic precursors.

The Romantic meditative poem displays a structure of situation, tone, and thought that might be described in general terms as follows. The poem is usually spoken by an identifiable speaker, who engages in a meditation of some length inspired by an actual landscape. The landscape is particularized—present as a kind of catalyst to the poet's thoughts; often it is described at some length in the opening paragraph of the poem. The ensuing meditation is framed in conversational tones, though it rises easily to a more formal and patterned poetic speech. The substance of the poem as a whole is determined by the poet's original experience of the landscape; in Abrams' words, "an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely interwoven with the outer scene."⁹ This interweaving of place of meditation, of external and internal landscapes, is the crucial factor for the shape of

the poem; the process of introspection, feeling, and observation leads the speaker finally to new insight, the resolution of some personal dilemma or of some more universal problem. The poem ends by returning to the outer scene; but though the external landscape may be unchanged, the internal landscape has been modified as a result of the process of their interaction. The speaker's mood has altered as his understanding has deepened, and he looks on the landscape before him with an enlarged vision of its meaning.

Several aspects of this poetic structure strike one as directly applicable to *Four Quartets*. There is the fact, first of all, that the speaker is determinate and that the setting is both particularized and localized. In *Four Quartets*, we know from the personal circumstances discussed in the poem that the speaker is a poet and that the poet is Eliot, just as we know that in "Tintern Abbey" the speaker is William Wordsworth; and like Wordsworth, Eliot has grounded each *Quartet* in his own experience of an actual place, a place we can visit ourselves. The primacy of a particularized landscape in the opening lines of these poems makes an enormous difference to the poetic experience that follows. The *Quartets* do not begin with a description of the landscape as "Tintern Abbey" does, but rather with the speaker's experience of the landscape, as in Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight"; and that experience blossoms into an extended meditation, furnishing at the same time the imagery to embody the poet's thoughts and give them a sensuous reality. The localized setting of each *Quartet* offers Eliot a resource that his earlier poetry did not benefit from; for the generalized landscapes there could not anchor the poetry in actual experience, nor were they as central to the poem's substance and structure.

From the opening landscape scene, the Romantic lyric extends inwards to an internal landscape of the mind and the heart; the poem is formed through an integral process of thought and feeling, of introspection and observation, whose mood and substance are affected throughout by the nature of the original external landscape. In "Tintern Abbey" for instance, the serenity and order of the landscape affects the poet's mood and is directly instrumental in inspiring the visionary heights of his imagination as well as moving him to a quiet acceptance of time, change, and death. In the *Quartets*, the opening experience of place also determines to a large extent the nature of what follows; for the ensuing meditations and lyrics remain connected in mood, concept, and imagery to the original landscape scene. To state it in another way, each

Quartet is framed to search out the full meaning of its primary landscape. The substance of each poem is tied to the landscape, and the structure too is shaped by it. Place is used structurally, on the formal principle of return, to punctuate the crucial points in the progress of the speaker's meditation. Thus, like Wordsworth and Coleridge, Eliot uses the external landscape to enunciate beginning and ending in each *Quartet* and over the poem as a whole; through this most basic structural principle, place is instrumental in creating the reader's sense of initiation and closure. But other and more subtle structural functions are performed by places, as for instance when two contrasting places are used in *Little Gidding I* and *Little Gidding II* to embody two different kinds of experience, and are then brought together in the imagery of the lyric in *Little Gidding IV* to suggest their synthesis. Substance and structure are both, then, crucially affected by place; if we examine the four poems briefly from this perspective, the centrality of place becomes readily apparent.

In *Burnt Norton*, the rose-garden offers up the first vision of the poem, a moment of sudden illumination which, although experienced in enigmatic terms, stands as the touchstone of the rest of experience, measuring the insufficiency of "waste sad time" (p. 195) by its own beauty, fulfilment, and completeness. The vision is embodied in images indigenous to the place—roses, the pool, the lotus flower, and the leaves of the tree. At this point, the experience is not fully understood, but later in *The Dry Salvages*, these images are seen in the light of subsequent meditation as hints and guesses that find their essence ultimately in the Incarnation. If the visionary moment in the rose-garden is at first elusive, the rest of *Burnt Norton* is devoted to exploring and revealing its meaning. Images from the garden spill over into the details of the lyric in Section II, the "moving tree" and the "figured Leaf", and the ensuing discussion of the still point centres on the nature of the rose-garden vision as paradox. The garden is defined further by the contrasting urban landscape presented in Section III, the realm of the London underground that is neither darkness nor light. We return to the garden in Part IV and the imagery of the lyric is partially derived from it. Finally, after a brief digression in Section V on the nature of poetry, the garden is restored at the end of the *Quartet* to redefine the poem's primary vision.

In *East Coker*, it is with the experience of darkness and death that we begin, grounded in the village scene and in the vision of the midnight

dancers. The poet's awareness of darkness and of death is never far below the surface in the sections that follow. The opening experience leads to the earnest meditation of Section II and comes to fruition in the lesson of humility accepted there. It is present by implication in the Miltonic accents that open Section III, although this section, like *Burnt Norton* III, seems to imply an urban landscape of theatres, undergrounds, bankers and statesmen and Section III concludes with St. John's negative way, which is itself a kind of death. The Good Friday lyric is entirely in keeping with the logic of the poem so far, extending the lament for death into formal and religious terms, and celebrating the one death that leads us into life. Finally in Section V, again after a brief discussion of his poetic craft, the poet returns directly to the thought of home and to the old stones in the village churchyard, emblems of the opening experience of death; and now the earlier hint of departure into a new and alien place is realized in full, as Eliot sweeps us into the world of *The Dry Salvages*.

In *The Dry Salvages*, river and sea first define the two conceptions of time central to the poem's argument. The sestina of Section II enlarges upon the experience of the endless ocean of time and its calamitous annunciations; in the ensuing meditation, Eliot abandons the world of the sea for a space, though he is still concerned with the nature of time and especially the past. River and sea return at the end of Section II, bringing with them the new image of the rock, emblem of the permanence of past agonies in the fluctuating currents of time. The departure into the alien milieu of Krishna and Arjuna in Section III seems less radical when viewed from the perspective of place, for images of voyaging pervade it, especially voyaging by sea. The wisdom of Krishna merges with a final sea voice descanting in the rigging and aerial, and is phrased in the language of the sea: "Fare forward. O voyagers, O seamen" (p. 211). The ingenuous lyric of prayer that follows brings the sea imagery of the poem to its fruition, investing it with the serenity of the Queen of Heaven and with the acceptance exemplified in her prayer at the annunciation of Christ's birth. Section V returns to a consideration of time, counterpointing our human curiosity that clings to past and future with the saint's apprehension of time's intersection with eternity. This antithesis leads directly to the Incarnation, a reality implied in the earlier reference to the "Prayer of the one Annunciation" (p. 208). The usual discussion of words is displaced here by the more crucial, though not unrelated, consideration of the Word. The conclusion of *The Dry Salvages* takes us back to dry land again and to a place of significant soil.

Like *Burnt Norton*, *Little Gidding* is structured on the experience of two very different places. The opening vision of the flaming ice and the blossoming hedgerow defines the rest of the poem's mood and ultimately yields its central concept of detachment. In Section II, Eliot transfers us to the war torn scene of London, arguing from this scene the necessity for sacrifice, atonement, and purgation. Section III returns us to Little Gidding, and the blossoming hedgerow there defines and diagrams Eliot's crucial distinction between the three conditions that often look alike, attachment, detachment, and indifference. In this section, the place and its history form the substance of his thoughts about human actions. Section IV beautifully combines images from both places, restating the message of Section II in a communication tongued with fire like that of Section I. Finally in its first paragraph, Section V accomplishes the difficult task not only of closing the earlier discussions of the craft of poetry, but also of recapitulating the original experience of place in *Little Gidding* itself. We return briefly to the secluded chapel and are filled with thoughts of the dead and dying, and of a people with a history that is "a pattern/Of timeless moments" (p. 222). In the final paragraph of the poem, Eliot returns to many of the images from the other places of *Four Quartets*, "the unknown, remembered gate", "the children in the apple-tree", the river and the sea, and "the tongues of flame" (pp. 222-223), bringing together the various experiences of place into the one central vision they have all communicated.

Like Wordsworth and Coleridge, then Eliot found landscapes to be an invaluable resource in framing the substance and structure of meditative poetry. And like them too, he composed his meditative poem in a flexible style that ranges easily from a prosaic and conversational mode to a more formal and patterned speech. The elasticity of the verse medium in *Four Quartets* is one of the most remarkable features of its style. There are times when lyric rhythms predominate, as in the opening lines of *Burnt Norton* IV: "Time and the bell have buried the day,/The black cloud carries the sun away" (p. 193). (These lines are actually based on the refrain of an early English lyric.)¹⁰ In the longer meditative sections, the verse is built on relaxed and sometimes conversational tones and rhythms, as in *East Coker* V: "And what there is to conquer/By strength and submission, has already been discovered/Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope/To emulate" (p. 203). Again at other times, the poetry is heightened to a very austere and formal stance, matched by a firmly patterned verse structure, as in *East Coker* IV and

Little Gidding IV. Even within sections, modulations in tone and rhythm are accomplished with ease. In *East Coker* II, the prosaic and low-key phrasing of the statement "There is, it seems to us,/At best, only a limited value/In the knowledge derived from experience" (p. 199), stands only a few lines away from the more sonorous and patterned conclusion of the section, "The only wisdom we can hope to acquire/Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless" (p. 199). And the musing tone that opens *The Dry Salvages* III, "I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant—/Among other things or one thing of putting the same thing" (p. 209), is easily transformed into the compelling and hortatory message of the god, "And do not think of the fruit in action./Fare forward" (p. 211). It is Eliot's accentual metre that permits and encourages such flexibility in style. Wordsworth's blank verse too was a supple medium in his hands. He too could pass from the conversational "For nature then/. . . /To me was all in all. — I cannot paint /What then I was" to the magnificently patterned "but hearing oftentimes/The still, sad music of humanity,/Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power/To chasten and subdue."¹¹ Yet even more in *Four Quartets*, one feels the elasticity of the verse medium beyond anything in the Romantic meditative poem. Here is a verse structure supple enough to comprehend such variance as a modified sestina, a metaphysical piece, an imitation of Dante, and a direct transposition of lines from *Dark Night of The Soul*. Indeed, one of the amazing accomplishments of *Four Quartets* lies in its success in maintaining such a variety of poetic modes within a single whole.

In one respect, *Four Quartets* departs from the general pattern of the greater Romantic lyric: whereas there the speaker's meditation is sustained and continuous (cf. "The Eolian Harp" and "The Nightingale"), in *Four Quartets* it is broken into sections and interspersed with purely lyrical verse. The lyric sections extend the range of expression and provide opportunities for very different sorts of "approach to the meaning" at the heart of the poem. They are always related to the poet's more direct meditation and to the initial experience of place; sometimes they contain actual details of the opening landscape (*Burnt Norton* II, *The Dry Salvages* II, *Little Gidding* IV), and at other times they do not (*East Coker* IV, *Little Gidding* II). In extending the spectrum of tones and styles, these lyric sections condition us to accept a great variety of poetic modes as part of the whole, and so fall naturally into the larger pattern of variation that pervades the poem. Yet, even within the meditative sections, as we have seen, Eliot manages to comprehend a greater variety of

tones and styles than is usual in the greater Romantic lyric. Eliot has said that he felt a range of tone and intensity to be necessary in a long poem.¹² Though the principle of modulation through varying degrees of formality was indigenous to the form of the greater Romantic lyric, the length of most of these poems did not warrant extensive use of this aspect of style. *Four Quartets* is easily five or six times as long as the Romantic meditative poem and benefits greatly from the diversity of poetic styles that it encompasses. Eliot accomplishes all the variations, transitions, and returns with consummate skill, and one of the reader's greatest delights is to follow the poem's unceasing modulations of style.

One final point of comparison between *Four Quartets* and the Romantic meditative poem suggests itself. As Abrams points out, the process of meditation in the greater Romantic lyric brings the poet to some crucial insight: he "faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem. Often the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation."¹³ One thinks in this regard of Coleridge's "Fears in Solitude", which opens with foreboding thoughts of "uproar" and "strife" but ends with a renewed sense of "nature's quietness" and with a heart "softened" through love for "human kind".¹⁴ *Four Quartets* too follows this pattern. The outer landscape is seen at the end with a different eye than at the beginning; for the poet's understanding of its meaning of his relationship to it has deepened and crystallized in the course of his thought. The rose-garden of *Burnt Norton* is first experienced in perplexity and uncertainty; but its beauty and integrity lead the poet to search for a clearer understanding of its nature. This search constitutes the body of the poem. By the end of *Burnt Norton*, when the poet returns in thought to the rose-garden, he has gained a deeper intuition of his relationship to it. *East Coker* shows Eliot returning to his ancestral home with the assumption that his beginnings here contain his end; but the lessons he learns in the ensuing meditation about self and home lead him to the realization by the end of the poem that "Home is where one starts from" (p. 203). The realization of humility, the acceptance of the darkness of God, and the contemplation of Good Friday all lead to new beginnings in the poet's literary and spiritual endeavours. Perceiving now that "Old men ought to be explorers" (p. 203), he sets out from home in a new and exhilarated spirit of dedication. *The Dry Salvages* takes him into the world of river and sea, of time "within us"

and time "all about us" (p. 205). The restless waters bring knowledge of chaos and death. But the voyage finds its destination in the injunction at the end of Section III, spoken with absolute sureness. "Not fare well,/But fare forward, voyagers" (p. 211); and the restless waters are seen finally through the serene perspective of the Queen of Heaven. In the end, the poem returns us to the land with a new standard of judgment, "The life of significant soil" (p. 213). The vision at Little Gidding introduces the new idea of communication with the dead and with the past. As the vision is explored and defined, the poet comes to a deepened understanding of the meaning of history and of the relationship of past, present, and future in the pattern of the whole. (This, indeed, is the original problem posed in the opening ten lines of *Burnt Norton*.) But *Little Gidding* ends not only with a return to the secluded chapel at Little Gidding, but with a restoration of the other places of the poem and of its first beginning. The imagery of the rose-garden recurs here in the new light of all that has come after it. The uncertainty and perplexity have vanished, and the poet speaks with unshakable certainty about "the end of all our exploring" (p. 222), the place where we started. The final union of the fire and the rose, of the end and the beginning, completes the circle with consummate fitness; what Abrams describes as the poem rounding out upon itself to end where it began could not be actualized, one feels, more perfectly. The fire and the rose represent not only two places, Little Gidding and Burnt Norton, but two modes of vision and two forms of divine love. Their union in the last line brings the poem to a resolution by suggesting the fusion of all experience in the still point at its centre and of all places in the timeless and boundless Word.

NOTES

1. "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric," *From Sensibility to Romanticism*, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom, New York, 1965, pp. 527-560.
2. The individual places of *Four Quartets* are captured in such detail that Dame Helen Gardner has claimed that if she were blindfolded and dropped by helicopter into the garden of Burnt Norton, she would recognize the place at once as the garden of Eliot's poem (*T.S. Eliot and the English Poetic Tradition*, University of Nottingham, 1965, pp. 24-25).
3. *Collected Poems: 1909-1962*, London, 1963, p. 76. All quotations of Eliot's poetry will be taken from this edition, and page references will be cited in parentheses after each quotation.
4. The shape of *The Waste Land* was, of course, far different in its original draft from its finished version (see Valerie Eliot, ed., *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts*, London, 1971). Part IV included the more particularized seascape from Eliot's own experience of the New England coast in the area of the Dry Salvages. This seascape reappeared later in Part VI of *Ash Wednesday* and became the foundation for the whole of *The Dry Salvages*: but it was excised totally from *The Waste Land*, leaving only the ancient Phoenician sea of Phlebus.

5. "Dante" (1929), *Selected Essays*, New York, 1950, p. 223.
6. *From Sensibility to Romanticism*, p. 529.
7. "Sir John Denham," *The Times Literary Supplement*, No. 1,379 (July 5, 1928), 501.
8. *From Sensibility to Romanticism*, p. 538.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 527. See also Abrams' general outline of the structure as a whole (pp. 527-528).
10. Mark Reinsberg, "A Footnote to *Four Quartets*," *American Literature*, 21 (1949), 342-344.
11. "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt, Oxford, 1952, Vol. II, 261.
12. "From Poe to Valéry" (1948), *To Criticize the Critic*, New York, 1965, p. 34.
13. *From Sensibility to Romanticism*, p. 528.
14. "Fears in Solitude," *The Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed Ernest Hartley Coleridge, London, 1912, pp. 258 and 263.