

THE INTERSECTION OF THE TIMELESS MOMENT: PHILOSOPHICAL STRUCTURE  
AND ANTI-STRUCTURE IN T.S. ELIOT'S *FOUR QUARTETS*

by

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(Under the Direction of Adam Parkes)

ABSTRACT

This work is a consideration of a poetic dialectic of structured and anti-structured philosophical thought within T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. This dialectic, first perceived by Eliot during his years spent as a candidate for the degree of doctor of philosophy at Harvard University, sets a philosophical structure gleaned from the teachings of F. H. Bradley's pragmatic idealism and appreciated in the poetry of Dante Alighieri in poetic discourse with an anti-structure first apprehended by Eliot within the metaphysical void of Nāgarjuna's Mādhyamikan *via negativa*. This essay proposes a sustained link between philosophical and metaphysical interests explored and qualified within Eliot's graduate thesis and the poetic expression of the transcendent possibilities of those notions of structure and anti-structure within his *Four Quartets*.

INDEX WORDS: Structure, Anti-structure, F. H. Bradley, Nagarjuna, T. S. Eliot, Four Quartets, Philosophy, Metaphysics, Transcendence, Anglicanism

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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated with love and gratitude to my family.

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## Abbreviations

CP	Collected Poems 1909 – 1962
IMH	Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909 – 1917
KE	Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley
OP&P	On Poetry and Poets
SW	The Sacred Wood
SP	Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot
WLF	The Waste Land Facsimile

### *Introduction*

It may seem superfluous at this point to critically affirm the deeply philosophical qualities of T. S. Eliot's poetry, particularly his *Four Quartets*. Scholarly tradition has long recognized the philosophical influences of Eliot's academic years on both his personality and his poetry. Likewise, Eliot's intellectual and poetic debts to F. H. Bradley as well as his interest in Eastern philosophy, art and religion are all familiar and well-researched critical subjects. There is, despite such scholarly familiarity with his philosophical underpinnings, the need for a widening of the attention paid to Eliot's Eastern and Western source materials.

There has been a critical tendency to over-determinedly separate Eliot's philosophical source materials into hemispheric singularities, focusing academic and interpretive attention on either the West or the East, one at a time. While the tradition of Eliot's Western inheritances has never suffered neglect, and more recent scholarship has seen attention grow from relatively superficial considerations of Eliot's Eastern interests as the mere decorations of an amateur Orientalist to far more useful and thorough investigations of their origins and implications, there has been a critical lacuna in simultaneous investigations of Eastern and Western influences in Eliot's poetry. The point is not just that Eliot knew more about his Eastern source materials than he might have been originally credited with, it is that he *uses* that knowledge in concatenation with the Western tradition to specific and recognizable poetic and theosophical ends. There is room in the crowded critical bibliography surrounding high-modernism's most enigmatic poet for an exploration of *why* Eliot so often employs an integration of Eastern and Western

philosophical allusions within his poems, and this requires readings and explanations that are likewise integrated.

“In the poetry [of the *Four Quartets*], of course,” writes F. R. Leavis, “there is no pretense that the sensibility is not Christian; but it is not for nothing that D. W. Harding described ‘Burnt Norton,’ which doesn’t stand apart from the body of Eliot’s religious verse, as being concerned with the creation of concepts” (Leavis 111). There is no denying that the ultimate sensibilities of Eliot’s *Four Quartets* are distinctly Christian, but the concepts through which Eliot poetically explores these Christian sensibilities are actively diverse.<sup>1</sup> Eastern allusions, images, and iconographies do not merely decorate the *Quartets*; they are active engagements with their attendant philosophical and metaphysical implications and the relationship of those implications to Eliot’s Christian expression. Eliot’s spiritual and linguistic explorations throughout the *Quartets* are deeply invested in considerations of transcendence and, while certainly aiming at transcendence on Christian terms, Eliot’s intermingling of Eastern and Western theosophical concepts is undertaken with a mind to the transcendent possibilities of both Occidental and Oriental thought, working together rather than independently.

When Hugh Kenner writes that the lotos rising from the mysterious pool in the ghostly rose-garden of *Burnt Norton* “moves rather like a ballerina of Diaghilev’s,” the full theosophical implication of the image of the lotos to the *Four Quartets* goes un-remarked (Kenner 295). It is overly Euro-centric to see the qualities of the Russian ballet in the lotos before the theosophical implications of one of Buddhism’s most iconic symbols; a symbol Eliot invokes throughout the movements of the *Quartets* as part of a measured dialectic of transcendence predicated on both Eastern and Western influence.

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<sup>1</sup> “The meaning of a concept,” Eliot writes in his thesis on Bradley, “always exceeds the idea, and is of virtually indefinite extension” (*KE* 39).

Recent Eliot scholarship has also tended to focus more on Eliot's relationship to material culture than to his expressions of spirituality. Spirituality, however, is central to the *Quartets* and Eliot's later writings, after his Anglican conversion in 1927. If *The Waste Land* bears any of the "rhythmic grumbling"<sup>2</sup> of Eliot's inner perturbations (as Eliot himself claimed), the *Four Quartets* are a poetic and philosophical reconciliation of the sources of that personal distress – a transcendence of the immediately temporal world with all its fallibilities and limitations for a consideration of the spirit (*WLF* 1). Leavis recognizes that Eliot, in his *Quartets*, has "pre-eminently stood for the spirit," exploring the ability of the soul to transcend the desiccated modern world of appearances, in recognition of the need for a "new and more than personal life," an apprehension of the divine (Leavis 114, 124). Christian transcendence is the business of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, and his sustained poetic "explorations into the concrete actualities of experience below the conceptual currency; into the life that must be the *raison d'être* of any frame – while there is life at all" are undertaken within a poetic and theosophical discourse of philosophical structure and anti-structure whose origins were derived from his academic engagements with the philosophies of his pragmatic contemporary, F. H. Bradley, and the first century Mādhyamikan Buddhist monk, Nāgarjuna, along with – through a synthesis of Bradleyan ethics – the poetry of Dante Alighieri (Leavis 124).

This philosophical dialectic of structured and anti-structured thought, first perceived by Eliot during his doctoral coursework at Harvard and Oxford, remained an enduring concept, lasting from the production of his graduate thesis on Bradley to, upon his considered evolution

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<sup>2</sup> Eliot is quoted in an epigraph to the manuscript version of *The Waste Land*, published in 1971 under the title *T. S. Eliot, The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*: Various critics have done me the honour to interpret the poem in terms of criticism of the contemporary world, have considered it indeed, as an important bit of social criticism. To me it was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling. (*WLF* 1)

from a spiritually anxious Ph.D. student to an Anglican poet of religious verse, the culmination of his public poetic career, the *Four Quartets*. Structure in this sense was, for Eliot, the transcendence of one's necessarily limited existence within the necessarily limited world of appearances by means of a recognition and veneration of tradition – particularly Western, Christian, European tradition – that he gleaned from the teachings of Bradley's pragmatic idealism. Anti-structure, alternately, was the metaphysical repudiation of all philosophical or intellectual systems in favor of a personal perfection of theosophical emptiness that allowed for an apprehension of the absolute within the resulting void of Nāgarjuna's Mādhyamikan *via negativa*.

Structure and anti-structure became, for Eliot, two disparately conceived yet unifyingly opposed strategies for discovering and expressing personal transcendence. An investigation of the theosophical inheritances of Eliot's academic philosophical engagements within his *Four Quartets* yields a greater insight into the manner in which Eastern and Western source materials are simultaneously and productively transmuted into the poetic expression of his religious life. The dialectic of Bradleyan and Dantescan structure, along with Nāgarjunan anti-structure, became a means by which Eliot could, in his sweeping poetic exploration of his "new and more than personal life," more comprehensively engage, he believed, with those religious, metaphysical, and philosophical materials he wished to find original and un-dogmatic expression for within the poetry of his *Four Quartets*.

*Chapter 1*

*Theosophical Vision and the Unity of Opposites: the Cultivation of Eliot's Dialectic of Structure  
and Anti-Structure*

I

From October 1911 to June 1914 T.S. Eliot was a student at the Harvard graduate school as a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The following year, his serious engagement with academic philosophy led him to accept a university Traveling Fellowship at Merton College, Oxford, lasting from 1915 through 1916. During these formative academic years Eliot immersed himself in classical, contemporary, and Vedantic philosophies. He was a committed, though highly skeptical, consumer of philosophical and metaphysical doctrines, engaging throughout his life with nearly every significant intellectual movement of his time. An investigation of Eliot's philosophical preoccupations and evolutions reveals one of the most enduring of his intellectual fascinations, the seemingly antithetical relationship of systematically structural and anti-structural composition in philosophical, religious, and later literary, thought.

Structure for Eliot, in this sense, is the cumulative and communal accretion of the accomplishments of the venerated tradition of Western thought and belief – a tradition he would come to see perfected in the *Commedia* of Dante Alighieri – towards the ends of transcendent religious and philosophical enlightenment.<sup>3</sup> Anti-structure, accordingly, is the Eastern metaphysical and mystical notion of divesting oneself of such systems of thought or belief, foregrounding rather the *via negativa* of a complete philosophical vacuity and repudiation out of

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<sup>3</sup> “[T]he world,” Eliot writes in his doctoral thesis on F. H. Bradley, “so far as it is a world at all, tends to organize itself into an articulate whole. The real is the organized. And this statement is metaphysics,” (*KE* 82).

which one might achieve transcendent enlightenment – a notion he encountered most influentially in the teachings of the first-century Buddhist monk, Nāgarjuna. This complete personal and intellectual evacuation works dialectically with Eliot’s notion of structured philosophical thought and practice, forming a contrapuntally united whole of opposites that complement each other as disparate strategies for the self-enlightenment and transcendence required to slip the spiritually limiting yoke of the apparent, objectified world.<sup>4</sup> The notion of anti-structure allows for an evasion of the real experience of objects formed, as Eliot believed, by imperfect words in favor of an apprehension of the void that can perfectly counterpoise an immediate experience of the ideal and the Absolute. The opposing notion of structure, conversely, allows one to contend with the objectified world by attempting to order it, via tradition and in language, towards the ends of a communal apprehension of ideal intention as a means to perceive the divine.<sup>5</sup> Eliot would develop this notion of the intellectual and emotional compatibility between structured and anti-structured philosophical and metaphysical practices out of his formal academic exploration and qualification of the disparate teachings of his

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<sup>4</sup> “From first to last reality is experience,” Eliot argues, “but experience would not (so far as we know) be possible without attention and the moment of objectivity” (*KE* 165). In explaining this difficulties of existing in a world of appearances composed of objects which are constructed by faulty language, Eliot contends: “The word ‘object’ means a certain type of experience and the theories involved in that experience: theories which lose their meaning beyond a certain point. The only way in which we can handle reality intellectually is to turn it into objects, and the justification of this operation is that the world we live in has been built in this way. At the same time we are forced to admit that the construction is not always completely successful. While we can to a certain extent treat relations as if they were terms, we find with such entities as ideas that to treat them so is almost a step backward rather than a step forward, inasmuch as we can only apprehend their reality by putting ourselves in the place of an obscure world and abandoning a clear and scientific one” (*KE* 159). “[T]he separation of the real into idea and existence is a division admissible only within the world of appearance” (*KE* 33). “It is only in the world of objects that we have time and space and selves” (*KE* 31).

<sup>5</sup> “Reality,” Eliot writes, “is simply that which is intended and the ideal is that which intends; and ultimately – for we have no reason to stop – the intending is the totality of intending, and the intending is the whole of reality” (*KE* 36). The real and the ideal were merely imperfect abstractions to Eliot’s tastes, inauthentic distinctions made necessary by the limitations of the apparent world. In this sense, Eliot’s notions of structure and anti-structure can be recognized as necessarily opposed strategies of experiential perception that, when employed in dialogue against the limitations of the apparent world, comprise a great and totalizing philosophical whole.

intellectual contemporary F. H. Bradley, with his philosophy of pragmatic idealism, and those of Nāgarjuna's negative way Mādhyamikanism.

Eliot's was an intellect whose skeptical demands were never satisfied. No philosophy or doctrine, in his opinion, was suitable of its own singular accord and, as he argues in his doctoral thesis on Bradleyan metaphysics, all philosophies were subject to interpretation and qualification. "Any assertion about the *world*," Eliot writes, "or any *ultimate* statement about any *object in the world*, will inevitably be an interpretation. [...] A metaphysic may be accepted or rejected without our assuming that from the practical point of view it is true or false. The point is that the world of practical verification has no definite frontiers, and that it is the business of philosophy to keep the frontiers open" (*KE* 165, 169).<sup>6</sup> With no definite frontiers, Eliot's search for philosophical and spiritual verification was free to range, as it did, from West to East – from the structure of the positively accumulated cultural tradition to the anti-structure of the negative way of personal and metaphysical vacuity and emptiness.

The seeds of his poetic interest in these seemingly disparate models for contemplation of experience, language, and the Absolute can be traced back throughout the development of his philosophical, historical, and religious beliefs. If it was the business of Eliot's philosophy to keep intellectual and emotional frontiers open, then so too was it the business of his poetry. The awareness of a relationship between the structure of shared tradition, with its organized systems of thought and belief, and the anti-structure of the ontological repudiation and transcendence of those same systematic human constructions was sparked in Eliot by his formative philosophical engagements with Bradleyan metaphysics and Nāgarjunan mysticism. The resulting dialectic of philosophical and intellectual structure and anti-structure perceived by Eliot was poetically

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<sup>6</sup> Eliot, in a move indicative of the familiarity he felt existed between philosophy and literature, ends "Tradition and the Individual Talent" with a deliberate "halt at the frontiers of metaphysics or mysticism" (*SP* 43).

rendered as complementary models of philosophical enlightenment and spiritual transcendence, matured into a theosophical concomitance of Dantescan and Nāgarjunan notions of faith and redemption within the swan song of his career as a public, religious poet: the *Four Quartets*.

## II

Although critical treatments of Eliot's study of philosophy have often focused on the poet as merely a "young philosopher," to consider Eliot's attention to the philosophical merely as a passing academic interest, fomented in his intellectual youth and then forgotten, is to disregard a continuously evolving engagement with philosophy evinced throughout his life as a poet (Shusterman 31). Even when scholars such as Longenbach *et al.* have sustained engagement with the philosophical underpinnings of Eliot's poetry, their scholarship has left a lacuna in Eliot's mystical Eastern influences and the integrated dialogues between such influences and the Western pragmatism Eliot engaged with throughout his academic and literary life. Eliot retained a serious interest in philosophical systems and their emotional and intellectual stakes throughout his career, though he declined to express himself through professional philosophical channels. He believed the material of the philosopher – the ordering of objective and subjective knowledge in language towards the ends of an immediate apprehension of the Absolute<sup>7</sup> – was most effectively actualized through the business of the poet, and so he chose an artist's life in London rather than an academic's in Boston. Words, for Eliot, were the admittedly imperfect means by which ideal notions, conceptions, and objects became real in the human mind, and his poetry –

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<sup>7</sup> The "Absolute" as Eliot writes of it in his thesis on Bradley, is the apotheosis of perceptible experience into an achievement of immediate experience; it is the totality of the real and the unreal, relieved of their disingenuous verbal and intellectual distinctions, and a dismissal of the false distinctions between "inner" and "outer" in favor of a revelatory recognition of the whole truth of existence and experience – a self-transcendence of the apparent world and its manifold perceptive limitations. "Immediate experience," Eliot contends, "is a timeless unity which is not as such a present either *anywhere* or to *anyone*. It is only in the world of objects that we have time and space and selves" (KE 31).

the “intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings” as he names it in the second section of his second Quartet, *East Coker* – became the vehicle through which he attempted to evince his own beliefs by exploring his manifold doubts (*CP* 184). He has been declared “the first poet since Coleridge” to have assembled a coordinated philosophical system from eclectic sources that would resolve the nature of his poetry, the doctrine of his literary criticism, and even influence the conduct of his personal life (Skaff 3).

Eliot’s philosophical system was predicated on his anxiety over the possibility (or impossibility) of immediate experience of the Absolute and spiritual transcendence, and on his desire to discover the “still-point of the turning world” from which to perceive the divine.<sup>8</sup> It was a system – born of his extensive university education in Eastern and Western philosophy and his unyielding skeptical need to qualify every system of thought he encountered – which was able to delicately integrate the structural tradition of Western thought and belief with the anti-structural intellectual and emotional vacuity of Eastern mysticism – achieving, in its fusion of opposites, a complex and elegant strategy for personally and poetically engaging with his own ontological, existential, and religious desires and concerns.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> 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 not movement. And do not call it fixidity,  
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from  
nor towards,  
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still  
point,

(*CP* 177)

<sup>9</sup> Of this harmonizing capacity of philosophical enmity Jeffery Perl writes: “Opposed positions are connected naturally, connected by their opposition; and in a complex culture as in a complex personality, a wholeness of almost infinite, almost irrelative parts can happen solely through ambivalence” (Perl 48). Hugh Kenner also finds grounds on which to treat this connectivity between Eliot’s use of seeming opposites of imagery and thematics, suggestions simultaneously pertinent to the philosophical structure and anti-structure exhibited in the dialectics of Dante and Nāgarjuna as they relate to these dualities within Eliot’s *Quartets*. Of these reconciliations in the poems Kenner states: “Opposites [are] falsely reconciled, then truly reconciled: in the central section of the poem its central structure principle is displayed. The false reconciliation parodies the true one [...] Suggestion does not outrun

## III

Eliot's spiritual and metaphysical anxieties, and the beginnings of his search for a means by which to poetically address them, are perceptible even in his juvenilia. Gardens, dancers, roses, and souls are all familiarly attended to, as the philosophical and imagistic materials of Eliot's *Quartets* were tested and refined even in his earliest poetic endeavors. Many such echoes of Eliot's earliest poetic and philosophical perturbations can be traced from his earliest poems to his last professional publication.

A striking early example of Eliot's poetic consideration and anxiety over the nature and availability of the philosophical Absolute appears in an untitled poem from 1911. Describing the universe, Eliot writes in an unidentified other's voice:

He said: it is a geometric net  
 And in the middle, like a syphilitic spider  
 The Absolute sits waiting, till we get  
 All tangled up and end ourselves inside her.  
 (IMH 71)

The Absolute for Eliot at this stage is a terrifying arachnid, waiting to ensnare and destroy those who seek to perceive its mysterious interior, indicative of the metaphysical and spiritual unrest that would find Eliot lamenting within his Bradleyan thesis of the "annihilation and utter night" extant in any perception of immediate experience of the Absolute out of the apparent world of inherent limitations.<sup>10</sup>

In an untitled poem composed in 1914, Eliot similarly addresses his anxiety over the limiting, philosophically frustrating inheritance of existence within the world of appearances.

Appearances appearances he said  
 I have searched the world through dialectic ways;

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thought, nor design impose itself on what word and cadence are capable of suggesting. [...] Eliotic opposites may be resolved in contrary ways" (Kenner 300-1, 312).

<sup>10</sup> "If anyone," Eliot concludes, "assert that immediate experience, at either the beginning or end of our journey, is annihilation and utter night, I cordially agree" (KE 31)

I have questioned restless nights and torpid days,  
 And followed every by-way where it lead;  
 And always find the same unvaried  
 Intolerable interminable maze  
 (IMH 75)

In this illuminating untitled piece a young Eliot acknowledges the vexation of his endless intellectual skepticisms and admits his growing affinity for dialectics, prefiguring his future dialectic of structure and anti-structure within the *Four Quartets*.

In another untitled poem composed during his Harvard years, Eliot invokes, with a Nāgarjūnan exhortation of the abyss, the old notions of his constant philosophical anxiety over the frustrations of the apparent world. A young Eliot considers his insecure anxieties and the allure of the abyss in a poetic diction now reminiscent of *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915):

Do I know how I feel? Do I know how I think?  
 There is something which should be firm but slips, just at my fingertips.  
 [...]  
 My brain is twisted in a tangled skein  
 There will be a blinding light and a little laughter  
 And the sinking blackness of ether  
 I do not know what, after, and I do not care either  
 (IMH 80)

These closing lines of one of Eliot's earliest poetic consideration of his philosophical unrest harmonize gloomily with the "annihilation and utter night" sentiments he expresses in his Bradleyan thesis and resonate enigmatically with the "heart of light" and leaves full of laughing children that appear at the imagistically frenetic close of section I of *Burnt Norton*.

Nāgarjuna's philosophically evacuative influence on Eliot's Harvard poetry also appears in *The Burnt Dancer* (1914), which exhibits one of Eliot's first apparitions of the image of a fraught, burning dancer as a symbol of spiritual unrest and desire.<sup>11</sup>

Within the circle of my brain  
 The twisted dance continues.  
 The patient acolyte of pain  
 The strong beyond our human sinews,  
 The singèd reveller of the fire,  
 Caught on those horns that toss and toss  
 Losing the end of his desire  
 Desires completion of his loss.  
 (IMH 62-63)

This image of dancers and the dance as the symbolic manifestation of metaphysical turbulence and physical longing is yet another figure from Eliot's juvenilia that will reappear in his *Quartets*. Here Eliot's dancer, prefiguring the crisis of anxiety that will be fitfully expressed towards the close of the second section of *East Coker*, desires a Nāgarjunan emptiness that can relieve and transcend his desires. At the close of section II of *East Coker*, Eliot, after an anxiety-ridden contemplation of experience, humility and death concludes, "The houses are all gone under the sea. / The dancers are all gone under the hill" (CP 185).

In one of the earliest surviving poems from Eliot's academic years, *Convictions (Curtain Raiser)* (1909), Eliot produces a scene and invokes anxieties once again evocative of the first, confused rose garden of *Burnt Norton*:

Among my marionettes I find  
 The enthusiasm is intense!  
 They see the outlines of their stage  
 Conceived upon a scale immense  
 And even in this later age  
 Await an audience open-mouthed  
 At climax and suspense.

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<sup>11</sup> This early poem is also interesting for its explicit use, as indicated in notation, of the *Bhagavad-Gita* as source material – a clear indication of Eliot's growing predilection for commingling Eastern and Western philosophy and imagery in his poetical considerations of his metaphysical and spiritual anxieties (IMH 220, n. 1-2).

Two, in a garden scene  
 Go picking tissue paper roses;  
 Hero and Heroine, alone,  
 The monotone  
 Of promises and compliments  
 And guesses and supposes.

And over there my Paladins  
 Are talking of effect and cause,  
 With “learn to live by nature’s laws!”  
 And “strive for social happiness  
 And contact with your fellow-men  
 In Reason: nothing to excess!”  
 As one leaves off the next begins.

And one, a lady with a fan  
 Cries to her waiting-maid discreet  
 “Where shall I ever find the man!  
 One who appreciates my soul;  
 I’d throw my heart beneath his feet.  
 I’d give my life to his control.”  
 (With more that I shall not repeat.)

My marionettes (or so they say)  
 Have these keen moments every day.  
 (*IMH* 11)

Already concerned with souls, terrestrial transcendence, and the insubstantialities of modern life, Eliot presents a poem peopled with vapid, chattering puppets, bereft of spiritual depth or philosophical substance. With his now-familiar sardonic wit, Eliot mockingly scores his nattering automatons. Their stage is conceived upon a “scale immense” (even “in this latter age” of spiritually desiccated modernity), but they are unfit, as is evidenced by their insubstantial chitterings, to perform important roles or pursue noble ends.

On setting his grand stage of metaphysical, philosophical, and religious possibility, Eliot immediately moves to an ironically designated “Hero” and “Heroine” in an allusively and “Eliotically” resonant “garden scene.” The failure of Eliot’s marionettes to perform spiritually

important parts in what should be a multifariously evocative setting is made bitingly clear by their collection of mere “tissue paper roses;” fake flowers for Eliot’s fake souls. Hero and heroine are then separated meaningfully by the word “alone,” cordoned off in commas, left to babble inanely and uninterestingly to one another of “promises and compliments / And guesses and supposes.”

The poem then shifts to similarly undermined Paladins, should-be vestiges of regal chivalry and virtue, “talking of effect and cause” in shallow axioms. Nature’s laws – not heavens – are venerated and social happiness – not spiritual peace – is desired. Their focus is terrestrial, not religious and Eliot’s anxious dissatisfaction with their vapidness evinces itself in his dispassionate, mordant tone.

Eliot’s third and final dissatisfied vignette finds a lady with her waiting-maid, sighing over notions of romantic love. For the first time in the poem, the word “soul” is invoked, but only in the flighty musings of an overly eager, philosophically saccharine, amorously immature dilettante. Love, in this scene, is a diminished, carnal notion and the idea of the “soul” is nothing like that which Eliot recognizes as requiring an escape from such desultory, terrestrial inconsequentialities for a meaningful apprehension of the divine out of the diminished, apparent world.

Twenty-six years later, Eliot would create another rose garden at the opening of *Burnt Norton*, with the spiritual limitations of the apparent world still of anxious, poetic concern for him. Eliot creates a confusing, referentially convoluted garden of uncertain location, temporality, grammar, and allusion. “Other echoes,” Eliot writes, “Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?” Here is an immediate offer of a Dantescan guide to be followed on a journey into the garden, but the guide here is echoes, acoustic shades of an unidentified original sound. We are

dizzily presented with the inheritance and implications of the apparent world of insecure perceptions provoked, as Eliot believed, by imperfect, fallible language the likes of which have ushered us into an indeterminate garden, populated with impossible and indefinite echoes and voices.<sup>12</sup> This garden, unlike that of Eliot's *Convictions*, has the sense of a deeper meaning, but at the start of the *Quartets*'s poetic journey of the soul – confusingly situated, as it is, in the apparent world of imperfect perceptions (sorely testing our perceptions of reality with its self-generating, self-evacuating pools and talking birds) – we are unable, as of yet, to decipher it.

So we moved, and they, in a formal pattern,  
 Along the empty alley, into the box circle,  
 To look down into the drained 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,  
 And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.  
 Then a cloud passed and the pool was empty.  
 Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children,  
 Hidden excitedly, containing laughter.  
 Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind  
 Cannot bear very much reality.  
 Time past and time future  
 What might have been and what has been  
 Point to one end, which is always present.  
 (CP 176)

After accepting the behest of the incorporeal, Dantescan guide, movement of a formal pattern within an empty space sparks the revelation of the ineffable pool and the appearance of the lotos and the rose, one of the first fusions of Eastern and Western philosophical and religious imagery within the *Quartets*. Dante's Catholic rose of heaven – the multi-foiate form of the empyrean of the *Paradiso* – and the Buddhist conception of the thousand-petaled lotus – the symbol of transcendent enlightenment – are simultaneously evoked in Eliot's referentially and

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<sup>12</sup> Even the meter, constantly frustrated by rhythmically choppy commas, resists a comfortably fluidity of signs and signifieds.

perceptibly confusing garden.<sup>13</sup> For Dante, the rose was the symbol of heaven, the mount of the empyrean in the *Paradiso* upward to which he is led, and at its epicenter: the “still point” of the turning wheel of the world, God. For Nāgarjuna, the rose is equitable to, and collapsed by Eliot into, the symbol of the thousand-petaled lotus “blooming,” as he writes it, out of an empty pool “filled with water out of sunlight” “in the rose garden” (as an Oriental and Occidental blend of a moment of enlightenment). P. S. Sri explicates this complex blend of the rose and the lotus:

The single rose is essentially “a symbol of completion, of consummate achievement and perfection,” and figures prominently in Western mystical literature as an image of unity. To Dante, the “white rose” represents the fulfillment of his quest for the eternal Being of God. The “multifoliate rose” as a symbol of reality beyond appearances is the Western equivalent to “the thousand-petaled lotus” (*sahasrāra*) of Eastern mysticism. Tantrism, an esoteric branch of yoga, symbolizes the spiritual current in man as a serpent coiled up at the base of the spinal cord. When the yogi (one who seeks to yoke or unite himself with the divine essence) advances spiritually, the current gradually uncoils and rises upwards, enfranchising a series of lotuses or spiritual centres in the body. [...] When the current culminates in the *sahasrāra* or the thousand-petaled lotus in the brain or crown of the head, the yogi attains enlightenment; he is one with the reality behind all appearances. (Sri 93)

The lotus that blooms in the rose garden in *Burnt Norton*, then, connects these Eastern and Western conceptions of the still centre of the turning wheel, foregrounding a powerfully enigmatic collapstation of the Dantescan with the Nāgarjunan in the poems that will culminate in the final image in *Little Gidding* of the rose and the flame in-folding.

Eliot’s first section ends, as his journey is beginning, with the bird’s exhortation to leave the garden of apparent, referential confusion with its shimmering threats of premature divine enlightenment, for as we are warned, “human kind / Cannot bear very much reality.” It is not the work of a moment, or an inscrutable vision of spiritually and metaphysically pregnant images

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<sup>13</sup> With consistently confusing grammar, Eliot’s construction, “And the lotos rose” is purposefully and cleverly indistinguishable as either a description of a rising lotos or as a subjectively prefigured collapstation of the Dantescan rose and the Nāgarjunan lotos in the *Quartets*.

and allusions to achieve enlightenment and apprehend the divine; it is the work of the rigorous, philosophical and poetic journey to be written out through all four *Quartets*.

#### IV

An acute sense of burdened history, conducted through time in a material and declining world, catalyzed within Eliot an interest in the notion of a philosophical “great whole,” while his rigorous skepticism fueled his interest in the inherent ambivalence extant between Oriental and Occidental, ancient and modern thought (Perl 48).<sup>14</sup> He was both a philosopher and a poet greatly preoccupied with the relationship between thought and feeling and with a search for an absolute point outside the flux of history. Louise Glück elucidates the central obsessions driving Eliot’s poetics towards philosophical, metaphysical, and eventually religious ends, ultimately connecting their sustained influence to his Anglican conversion:

The goal, in Eliot’s monologues, is communion. The problem is that an other cannot be found, or attention secured. [...] The anxiety of the need and the anguish of the effort make for a desperate intimacy; [...] To read Eliot, for me, is to feel the presence of the abyss. [...] What has driven these poems from the first is terror and need of the understandable other. When the terror becomes unbearable, the other becomes god.  
(Glück 21-22)

But Eliot’s “other,” as Glück describes it, did not become Eliot’s “god” quickly or easily, and an awareness of the antithetics of structure and anti-structure permeated the considerations of the material and immaterial worlds towards which philosophy and mysticism propelled Eliot’s

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<sup>14</sup> Evincing the resonances of the concerns and patterns of his philosophical thoughts within his poetry, when asked by Donald Hall during a 1959 interview for the *Paris Review* (Spring/Summer 1959, p.58), “You seem often to have written poems in sections. Did they begin as separate poems?” Eliot answered: “That’s one way in which my mind does seem to have worked throughout the years poetically – doing things separately and then seeing the possibility of fusing them together, altering them, and making a whole of them” (*IMH* xiii). Published as four poems over the course of seven years, Eliot’s *Quartets* are similarly recognizable as a composition of fused elements, meant to form a poetic and philosophical whole.

active intellect and anxious spirit.<sup>15</sup> In his uneasy revulsion to the great emptiness he sensed within modern life, Eliot sought, through rigorous attention to philosophy, mysticism, metaphysics, and religion, a redemptive transcendence that could elevate the soul beyond restrictive personal isolation and into an ideal, impersonal communion with an authoritative Absolute that his skeptical intellect craved. Eliot's consignment of the ineffabilities of the Absolute to the notion of "god" was, as he described it, the end result of a rigorous philosophical, emotional, and intellectual skepticism, put to task by a compendium of philosophies, theories, metaphysics, and dogmas, which, to his conscience, rendered all other alternatives unacceptable. "Observations of the futility of non-Christian lives has its part," Eliot explains of his eventual religious conversion, "and also realization of the incredibility of every alternative to Christianity that offers itself. One may become a Christian partly by pursuing scepticism to its utmost limit."<sup>16</sup>

Eliot wrote in 1928 of his anxiety about the deadening spiritual vacuity he sensed pervading modern experience and his own theosophical need for a religious life. He was alarmed at what he perceived to be the lack of anxiety in others over the vast inattention to the importance of the supernatural, and as a poet of religious vision Eliot sensed a need to write the means by which the supernatural might once again be achieved in the modern condition. He wrote with some bewilderment of spiritually empty people, who seemed "to be unconscious of any void – the void that I find in the middle of all human happiness and all human relations, and which there is only one thing to fill. I am one whom this sense of the void tends to drive towards

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<sup>15</sup> Eliot, roughly a decade after his conversion, describes in the introduction to his *Revelation* (1937) the dissatisfying philosophical extremities that eventually propelled him towards religious belief: "The human mind is perpetually driven between two desires, between two dreams each of which may either be a vision or a nightmare: the vision and nightmare of the material world, and the vision and nightmare of the immaterial. Each may be in turn, or for different minds, a refuge to which to fly, or a horror from which to escape. We desire and fear both sleep and waking... We move, outside of the Christian faith, between the terror of the purely irrational and the horror of the purely rational" (Jain 10).

<sup>16</sup> *A Sermon*, preached in Magdalene College Chapel, 7 March 1948 (Cambridge, 1948), p. 5.

asceticism or sensuality, and only Christianity helps to reconcile me to life, which is otherwise disgusting” (Murray 118). Eliot found a strategic duality for considering this reconciliation within the disparate philosophies of Bradley and Nāgarjuna, and his awareness of that duality cultured the aesthetic and intellectual germs of the resulting poetic dialectic of structure and anti-structure that would eventually flourish within his *Four Quartets*.

## V

Eliot’s early philosophical studies at Harvard were conducted during what has been described as the “Golden Years” of American Philosophy (Jain 60). Though perceived at times to be at certain intellectual and temperamental odds with Harvard’s laureated faculty,<sup>17</sup> Eliot’s academic engagement with such luminaries as George Santayana, James Haughton Wood, Irving Babbitt, and Josiah Royce during his time in Harvard’s graduate school honed his natural affinity for skeptical rigor and conferred upon him the cultural and intellectual capital – Dante, Sanskrit, Bradley - by which to later prosecute his intensive poetic engagement with the central philosophical and literary concerns his skepticism maintained throughout his life as a poet (Sigg 18).

Eliot’s indefatigable skepticism led him to engage with the disparate collection of world philosophies, metaphysics, and religions that would lead him to the teachings of Bradley and Nāgarjuna. This skepticism, a “high and difficult” religion in its own right as he considered it (and the means by which he ultimately achieved his religious life) was bred into him from his earliest days and nurtured throughout his formal academic education.<sup>18</sup> Despite his often

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<sup>17</sup> Eliot’s skepticism kept him at occasional philosophical odds with the pragmatic Unitarianism characterizing the Harvard Philosophy department of his day (Jain 36-39).

<sup>18</sup> “In [his] attempt to find a *via media* between the antithetical extremes of secular philosophies, the rational and the irrational, the material and the immaterial, the most vital factor for Eliot was scepticism. In an early essay which he

contentious relationship with his family's Unitarian values and beliefs (beliefs he would formally reject upon his conversion to the Anglican faith in 1927), Eliot retained and developed his family's heightened sense of mistrust for the personal excesses and unseemly conveniences of evangelical self-expression and self-conversion. Overly personal and conveniently immediate, evangelicalism was, to the Eliot family's well-educated, practical Unitarian taste, a cheap and desultory substitute for a faith that should be groomed over a difficult lifetime of traditional construction and rigorous refinement, and this veneration of tradition and impersonality would follow Eliot throughout his career, resonating in his work as both an academic and a poet (Sigg 15).

This nascent predilection for skepticism and intellectual and emotional self-discipline was strengthened and developed by Eliot's academic training at Harvard and Oxford, where his skeptical affinities found invigorating encouragement within Bradley's pragmatic doctrine of skeptical intellectual methodology and the *via negativa* of Nāgarjuna's unyielding philosophical repudiations.<sup>19</sup> Within Bradley's intellectual system, in particular, Eliot discovered the foundation for a mode of skepticism rigorous enough to suit his desire for logical precision and thorough enough to adequately investigate, through its scouring method, the various philosophies, metaphysics, and theologies that fascinated him (Skaff 11). "An honest and truth-seeking skepticism," Bradley declares, "pushes questions to the end," and Eliot's "high and difficult" adherence to the skeptic's way drove his intellectual and philosophical interests through a staggeringly inclusive collection of doctrines and dogmas during the years of his

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wrote at Harvard he asserted that faith 'should be seasoned with a skillful sauce of scepticism', and he went on to say that 'scepticism too is a faith – a high and difficult one'. He later defined the sceptic as the man 'who is still more relentless towards his own beliefs than towards those of others'" (Jain 11).

<sup>19</sup> "Only in Bradley's system did Eliot find the potential for a statement of skepticism sufficiently rigorous to suit his penchant for logical precision, and sufficiently thorough to sweep away the philosophical assumptions of the entire nineteenth century" (Skaff 11).

formal academic endeavors and beyond (Bradley 379). Eliot developed this driving need to skeptically torture any intellectual system that engaged him, because finding where one broke down accentuated for him where it succeeded. Thus every intellectual system, Eliot believed, needed qualification; through this methodological adherence to the skeptic's way, the modern horror of god's absence, as he perceived it, could lead to an apprehension of god's presence.

The germs of a theosophical dialectic between structure and anti-structure are discernible throughout the various philosophical explorations undertaken by Eliot throughout his life and career. The intellectual genesis of this dialectic means to apprehend a supernatural life, matured in Eliot's *Four Quartets* to the poetic concomitance of Dantescan Catholicity and Nagarjuna Mādhyamikanism, is most identifiable, however, in those most formative of his academic endeavors: his intensive graduate instructions in the teachings of F.H. Bradley and Vedantic Buddhism at Harvard's School of Philosophy and Oxford's Merton College.

## VI

The effects of Eliot's formative academic years on his poetry and personality were vast and abiding. Eliot's philosophical engagements were not only a source for his poetry; they became the intellectual underpinning of his eventual religious conversion to the Anglican Church in 1927. Eliot was, and remained, intellectually and emotionally concerned with the ability – or inability – of a soul to transcend its own personal and historical limitations of imperfect perspective to achieve an immediate, and redeeming, experience of the Absolute. It was during his intensive philosophical studies at Harvard and Oxford, particularly those of Bradleyan

metaphysics and of Vedantic philosophies, that he first encountered the means by which he would attend, personally and poetically, to this spiritual anxiety.<sup>20</sup>

Eliot, ever dissatisfied with singular, and in his opinion necessarily limited,<sup>21</sup> philosophical doctrines, found the philosophies of the East and West to be multiple parts of a great whole, a whole whose complexity was such that its pieces were necessarily antithetical (Perl 48). Through his interest in this ambivalence, Eliot honed a philosophical dialectic attendant upon his abiding concern for humanity's tenuous relationship to experiential totality and the Absolute that would endure throughout the remainder of his life. Eliot, through his study of Western and Eastern philosophy and metaphysics, developed a compositional philosophical dialogue between two seemingly disparate strategies for self-enlightenment, pairing an intellectual structure espoused in Bradley's Western metaphysics with a parallel anti-structure implied in the Eastern teachings of Nāgarjuna's Mādhyamikanism. In Bradley's philosophy, Eliot discovered a structured approach to enlightenment and transcendence through an intellectual and emotional integration into the historically- and temporally-situated cultural and philosophical tradition of Western thought and religion. In Nāgarjuna's Mādhyamikanism, Eliot found an anti-structural metaphysic whose teachings foregrounded the necessity of self-negating repudiations of fallible intellectualization and an acceptance of complete ontological and epistemological vacuity as the means towards metaphysical transcendence. This is not to say that Eliot mechanically adhered to a Bradleyan "structure" and a Nāgarjuna "anti-structure;"

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<sup>20</sup> The scientific doctrine of Darwinism had thrown the early twentieth century into an intellectual and spiritual flux, leading many of the era's greatest philosophical thinkers to actively engage with the contest of natural science and religion. The atmosphere of Eliot's Harvard years was thoroughly influenced by the efforts of pragmatic and idealist Philosophy faculty members such as Josiah Royce and James Haughton Woods to reconcile philosophy and religion to the new naturalist vision of scientific evolution and to, by way of their reconciliations, re-secure man's place in a cosmological order suddenly shaken by intellectual crisis (Jain 63).

<sup>21</sup> Distrustful of abstractions and systems, Eliot was always a qualified critic of even his own philosophical tastes, variously criticizing all philosophical systems for "their failure to encompass the richness, density, and complexity of experience" (Jain 86).

rather, these alternative, disparate, and seemingly antithetical models through which to attend to the ineffabilities of experience of an Absolute were subtle modes adopted by Eliot for a skeptical investigation of his own attractions to and dissatisfactions with philosophical and metaphysical interpretations of a discordant, contradictory universe, thereby satisfying his unending need to torture and clarify his own system of beliefs and disbeliefs. In blending an exploration of the mysticism of the East with a digestion of the tradition of the West, Eliot felt he was better able to comprehend the agony and the ecstasy of his spirituality, and, upon his later conversion, the implications of the Christian Incarnation and Annunciation (Murray 87, 124).<sup>22</sup> Structure and anti-structure eventually became, for Eliot, two inimically fused theosophical modes by which to apprehend an experience of the Living Word in the dilapidated machine of modernity; a positive and negative path towards a heightened awareness of existential, ontological horror and metaphysical, religious ecstasy.

## VII

Eliot's dissatisfaction with the various and (as he believed) incomplete Western philosophies he studied led him, like many of his Harvard contemporaries, to explore the foundational philosophies and metaphysics of the ancient East. Harvard Orientalism flourished during Eliot's time under the influence of the eminent Charles Rockwell Lanman, founding editor of the *Harvard Oriental Series*, Irving Babbitt, and James Haughton Woods, a former student of Lanman's and a distinguished Orientalist in his own right. Lanman, Babbitt, and

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<sup>22</sup> The doctrine of the Incarnation of Christ is central to the traditional Christian faith as held by the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, the majority of Protestants and the Bible. Briefly, it is the belief that the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, known as the Son or the Logos (Word), became flesh when he was miraculously conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary. This doctrine is specifically referenced in the Bible in John 1:14 and Colossians 2:9, and is known as the hypostatic union. The Annunciation refers to Christian conception of the Angel Gabriel's announcement to the Virgin Mary that she was to conceive the Son of God.

Woods were all instrumental in introducing the Harvard philosophy department to Indic studies in the early twentieth century, and it was these three men whom Eliot claimed as his closest academic contacts on his Harvard registration form of 1914 for the philosophy department. Eliot sat for Lanman's course in 'Elementary Sanskrit' in 1911-12, wherein he learned to translate back and forth between Sanskrit and English and began reading classical Indic texts, and his 1912-1913 course in Pali, which examined selections from the sacred texts of ancient Buddhism. He also studied under Woods in 1911-12, taking his course in Greek Philosophy, and again in 1912-13, taking his 'Philosophical Sanskrit' class.<sup>23</sup>

Lanman and Woods forged new horizons for American Orientalism during their time at Harvard, but their inability to transcend their situating constraints of cultural relativism and euro-centrism ultimately grounded them as products of their time. Eliot's response to the philosophy and poetry encountered under their tutelage was of a more complex nature, predicated on appreciation and synthesis rather than containment, valuation, or self-affirmation.<sup>24</sup> Speaking to an audience in Hamburg on 29 October 1949, Eliot confided an opinion of some illumination to a consideration of his dialectic of Eastern and Western philosophies in the *Four Quartets*. He stated:

[T]hat he had always cherished the belief that Europe had much to learn from India, and that the fault of the European admirers of Indian thought in the nineteenth century had been that they had sought to substitute the Eastern vision for the Western vision, the Brahmanic philosophy for the Christian philosophy, instead of trying to integrate, slowly and patiently, the one with the other. (Jain 110)

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<sup>23</sup> Echoes, images, and thematics first apprehended in these studies made their way into much of Eliot's later poetry. Eliot's use of the Fable of the Thunder from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, found in the final stanzas of his *Waste Land* have been directly attributed to an annotated copy of *The Twenty-Eight Upanishads* (in Sanskrit) given to him by Lanman (Jain 103).

<sup>24</sup> While Lanman and Woods suffered from an inability to purge their euro-centrist valuations of races and peoples from their engagements with Indian philosophy, Eliot approached the subject with an eye to recovering what he thought must necessarily be missing from the limited and necessarily incomplete philosophies of the West, seeking to apprehend the great philosophical whole, rather than elevate his own beliefs at the expense of ancient Indic philosophers (Jain 104-6).

Eliot found in his translations and interpretations of the sacred texts of ancient India a source network of allusions, cosmologies, philosophies, images, and themes that would recur in significant ways throughout his poetry. He also developed, in his study of Nāgarjunan Mādhyamikan philosophy of the negative Buddhist “middle way,” a fascination (though qualified, as always) with a formalized philosophical negativity that comfortingly coalesced, through radical difference, with his deep ambivalences about the structural familiarities of Western pragmatism and idealism. Eliot attested to his fondness for applying divergent methods towards common philosophical ends in his graduate thesis on Bradley. He describes words as creating objects through conscious arrangements of namings but admits this process is “painfully hampered by language” (*KE* 141). Objects without language cannot be real but the reality of objects expressed through language ultimately leads beyond its limited reality to an ultimate reality of ideals. “And in this way,” Eliot surmises, “every object leads us far beyond itself to an ultimate reality: this is the justification for our metaphysics” (*KE* 140). This acknowledgment of the ability of language to create objects of knowledge, which thereby demand an awareness of their transcendent totality in an ideal ultimate reality, seems to account for Eliot’s interest in traveling beyond singular philosophies and metaphysics, systems articulated in words that denote objects of knowledge that inherently demand to be transcended through a widening of consciousness, leading him to contend with the philosophies of the East as well as West in his necessary enlarging of his own metaphysical scope for the apprehension and interpretation of systems of knowledge. He writes of the need to simultaneously entertain disparate points of view, be they temporal or spatial, to the ends of transcendence:

I have tried to show that there can be no truth or error without a presentation and discrimination of two points of view [...]. All identities which two objects may present, though simply of colour or of form, involve a self-transcendence on the part of the

particulars. [...] There is no ... one world without a diversity of points of view for it to be one to. [...] For we vary by passing from one point of view to another or as I have tried to suggest, by occupying more than one point of view at the same time ... we vary by self-transcendence. The point of view (or finite centre) has for its object one consistent world, and accordingly no finite centre can be self-sufficient, for the life of a soul does not consist in the contemplation of one consistent world but in the painful task of unifying (to a greater or less extent) jarring and incompatible ones, and passing, when possible, from two or more discordant viewpoints to a higher which shall somehow include and transmute them. (*KE* 142-148)

Eliot's avocation, in the culminating document of his academic career,<sup>25</sup> of his need to unify "jarring and incompatible" worlds within the life of a soul towards the ends of self-transcendence illuminates a theoretical foundation for the dialectic of structure and anti-structure that he self-consciously employs in the conclusion of his poetic career as a poet of religious and theosophical vision.

## VIII

The Mādhyamikan philosophy of Nāgarjuna encountered by Eliot during his years at Harvard would have understandably been "jarring and (seemingly) incompatible" upon his first encounters with its central, evacuative tenets. To a mind as obsessed with the anxieties of the abyss as Eliot's, the teachings of a mind as comfortable in nothingness as Nāgarjuna's proved particularly influential. Mādhyamika Buddhism, meaning Middle Way Buddhism,<sup>26</sup> was founded by the philosopher Nāgarjuna in the second century A.D. "According to a standard text," as presented by Jeffrey Perl, this difficult method of Nāgarjuna was:

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<sup>25</sup> A document as fraught with attempted evocations of his own beliefs as it was with attempts to qualify or synthesize Bradley's.

<sup>26</sup> Nāgarjuna's Mādhyamikanism is a "middle way" between the antiquital struggle between the competing affirmative and nihilist schools of early Buddhism, arguing against an overly affirming interpretation of the Buddha's teachings as philosophically all-inclusive and yet resisting the nihilists' interpretation of those same teachings as preaching the ultimate futility and inherent defeat of all creation. Nāgarjuna's "middle way" embraced metaphysically negating emptiness and vacuity, but as a spiritually productive means towards an apprehension of the Absolute rather than a means by which to abandon any belief in such. (*Kalupahana* 5)

To show the self-contradictory nature of every concept and doctrine about reality . . . The aim of Nāgārjuna is to show that nothing positive or negative can be asserted of reality. It is therefore Śūnya (Vacuity, Emptiness). Even to think of it as Śūnya is a mistake, because the concepts, vacuity and emptiness, are understood with reference to fullness . . . Nothing determinate could be true and could express the nature of reality. Reality is unique, and even the concept of uniqueness is not applicable to it, because uniqueness can be understood only with reference to the non-unique . . . It is beyond concepts, and beyond speech also, if speech represents concepts. (Perl 52)

To live without the mental crutch of conceptualizations or “iconic substitutes for ‘immediate experience’” is, according to Mādhyamika, the condition of *nirvāna*, the word meaning literally, “extinguishing or blowing out.” The viewpoint of the Absolute, when it is achieved, is not absolutistic; it is an apotheosis of conventional reality.

In this light, Nāgārjuna didn’t have a theory in the Western sense; he was philosophically, ontologically, and tautologically *anti-structural*, far more interested in divesting one’s self of conceptions than in collecting them.<sup>27</sup>

According to the *Mādhyamikakarikas*, Nāgārjuna’s central philosophical text, *nirvāna*, as in the majority of Buddhist literature, is the counterpoint of *samsāra*, a word unsatisfactorily translated into Western terms as “the wheel of life,” “that which turns around for ever.” It is the “shabby, unphilosophic” world of imperfections, partial truths, and shades of meaning; it is “what there is,” and is the Buddhist and Nāgārjunan conception of unenlightened hell. The distinctiveness of Nāgārjuna’s Middle Way, or as it is sometimes known, “doctrine of emptiness,” is that Nāgārjuna held “*everything* as provisional and contingent (empty),” *samsāra* and *nirvāna* alike. A verse from the *Mādhyamikakarikas* explains:

Samsāra is nothing essentially different from nirvāna.  
Nirvāna is nothing essentially different from samsāra.

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<sup>27</sup> Although, since “truth, reality, and the systems of approach to them comprise the problem, not its solution,” this divestment was not the sole requirement for the achievement of enlightenment (Perl 54).

The limits of nirvāna are the limits of saṃsāra.  
 Between the two, also, there is not the slightest difference whatsoever.  
 (Perl 53-57)

Nāgarjuna's "anti-structure," then, is the idea that there is no reliable epistemology, teleology, or ontology on which to predicate the journey of the soul. Achieving true enlightenment is a process of *divesting* oneself of theories and philosophies, rather than habitually acquiring and accumulating them, effecting a radical shift in metaphysical perception rather than physical location or intellectual possession. Language itself is ill-equipped to explain this failure of theorization towards such a journey, as it is the corrupt basis for theory and philosophy itself and thus intrinsically doomed to unreliability.<sup>28</sup> True enlightenment, in Mādhyamikanism, is a culmination of the journey of the soul wherein one realizes that the end is the beginning and all that has changed is one's self and one's perceptions. *Samsāra* (akin to hell) is no different from *nirvāna* (akin to heaven) and to escape one is to arrive at the other and realize oneself temporally and ontologically (if these terms had meaning in the first place) unmoved but internally changed; a philosophical conception of the identical nature of metaphysical and spiritual opposites that echoes variously throughout Eliot's *Quartets*, "in my beginning is my end."<sup>29</sup> This complete personal and intellectual evacuation works dialectically with Eliot's notion of structured philosophical thought and practice, forming a unity of opposites that complement each other as disparate strategies for self-enlightenment and transcendence. Nāgarjuna's anti-structure allows for an elusion of the real experience of objects formed, as Eliot believed, by imperfect words in favor of an apprehension of the void that can perfectly counterpoise an immediate experience of the ideal and the Absolute. Bradleyan structure, on the

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<sup>28</sup> Eliot's "natural sin" as he names it (Murray 72)

<sup>29</sup> *East Coker*, the *Quartet* in which Eliot achieves (and begins to transcend) the poems' most fitful notes of spiritual anxiety, begins and ends with the Nāgarjunan exhortations, "In my beginning is my end" and "In my end is my beginning" (*CP* 182, 190)

other hand, allows one to contend with the objectified world by attempting to order it, via tradition and in language, towards the ends of a communal apprehension of ideal intention as a means to perceive the divine.

Despite his appreciation for Nāgarjuna's Mādhyamikanism, Eliot must have recognized this admiration for vacuity, in spite of its commitment to the liberating repudiation of philosophical or intellectual systems, as systematic in its own right and thus *a* voice within a great metaphysical dialogue rather than *the* voice. Nāgarjuna's philosophy was an appropriate source for Eliot's poetics rather than a hemispheric shift in his religion; a qualification of other qualifications and yet another metaphysical frontier to be pushed at rather than ultimately achieved. Beyond his pervasive skepticism, Eliot also had a clear conception of his own personal fixity within the cultural and historical inheritance of Occidental thought, philosophy, and religion that precluded an unqualified adherence to Mādhyamikanism. Thus when he consigns his considerations of the Absolute to the ineffabilities of faith in 1927, he does so despite his academic appreciation of and personal admiration for Vedantic philosophy and theology, as an Anglican rather than a Hindu or a Buddhist.<sup>30</sup>

Nāgarjunan repudiation was a spiritually calming means by which to embrace the "annihilation and utter night" that Eliot perceived in the horrors of the abyss, the necessary opposite to the ecstatic joy of positively perceiving the divine.<sup>31</sup> If it did not produce a hemispheric conversion within Eliot to its Buddhist tenets, it did, in its antithetical enmity,

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<sup>30</sup> Eliot was attracted to Indian philosophy but, ultimately, recognized his particularly situated Western inheritance that precluded any hemispheric transformations of his beliefs or faiths. This attraction to a mode of thinking so alien to his Western intellectual sensibilities helped foreground for Eliot the importance of his own cultural dependencies and of the inheritance of Western culture upon his own mind. Eliot came to believe that the only way he could ever understand Indian thought completely would be "to erase not only his own education in European philosophy but the traditions and mental habits of Europe for two thousand years" (Jain 109).

<sup>31</sup> This easy ability to reconcile seemingly opposite metaphysical methods is reminiscent of Herakleitos' philosophical "unity of opposites," from which Eliot tellingly quotes in his second epigraph to the *Quartets*, "The way upward and the way downward are one and the same" (*CP* 175).

produce within Eliot a strengthening counterpoint to the accumulative cultural tradition by which he came to accept his Anglo-Catholic spiritual inheritance, an inheritance predicated on the metaphysical achievements of the great Western religious and philosophical thinkers and writers of the past. This frontier of Nāgarjuna's "anti-structure," attractive to Eliot as a model by which to apprehend personal transcendence and influential in his acceptance of Anglicanism, is pushed within the *Four Quartets*, alongside the symbology, philosophy, and theology of the medieval Catholic structure of Dante's *Commedia*, towards that theosophical "great whole" by which the supernatural life might be recognized and strengthened.

## IX

While Eliot's assimilation of Eastern philosophical influence strengthened his theosophical and poetic convictions, it was the pragmatic idealism, rigorous skepticism, and veneration of tradition displayed by Eliot's intellectual contemporary, F. H. Bradley, which exerted perhaps the most significant and enduring influence over his intellect and imagination. Bradley was the impetus for Eliot's year spent studying at Merton, and his famously complex metaphysical philosophy was the subject of Eliot's doctoral dissertation, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley*. Through his study and qualification of Bradley, Eliot was able to construct an intellectual base for his conception of a structured mode of apprehending the Absolute through the inheritance of tradition: the cultural, philosophical, religious, and artistic tradition of Western thought in letters.

Absorbed and qualified by Eliot during his doctoral studies at Harvard and Oxford, Bradley's metaphysics has often been the starting-point for critical investigations of Eliot's philosophical foundations and religious beliefs, forming, as Hugh Kenner describes it, an

“ineradicable stain on his mind; ... imparting color to all else that passes through” (Kenner 45). Though Eliot spent much of his life either qualifying Bradley or gradually distancing himself publicly from his doctoral thesis, the Bradleyan “stain” on Eliot’s mind lingered until the end of his days as a published, public poet, its influence extending all the way to his *Four Quartets*. Throughout his career, Eliot was fascinated with the means through which language, “by articulating experience, makes a form for reality,” his place within that reality, his perception of the experience of that reality, his ability to commune with the Absolute (either through an impersonal transcendence of the real for the ideal or through the cohesive structuring of a venerated intellectual and emotional tradition), and his efforts towards an articulation of such through language are all at the heart of Eliot’s measured considerations and qualifications of Bradleyan metaphysics (Mallinson 7).

There are structured and anti-structured elements of thought within Bradley’s metaphysics and Eliot acknowledges both these modes within his thesis. Bradley, as Eliot details, advocates an anti-structural transcendence of self through feeling, an unstructured aspect of knowing:

Feeling is not (*Appearance*, p. 407) a ‘consistent aspect of reality’ although reality is that which we encounter in feeling or perception. [...] *Mere* feeling is something which could find no place in a world of objects. It is, in a sense, an abstraction from any actual situation. [...] Feeling, therefore, is an aspect, and an inconsistent aspect, in knowing; it is not a separate and isolable phase. On the one hand, feeling is an abstraction from anything actual; on the other hand the objects into which feeling is differentiated have a kind of union which they do not themselves account for; they fuse into each other and stand out upon a background which is merely felt, and from there they are continually requiring supplementation. In order that these developments – thought, will, pleasure and pain, objects – may be possible, feeling must have been given; and when these developments have arrived, feeling has expanded and altered so as to include them. (*Truth and Reality*, p. 175: ‘At every moment my state, whatever else it is, is a whole of which I am immediately aware. It is an experienced non-relational unity of many in one.’) This is what we mean by saying that feeling is self-transcendent. (*KE* 20-21)

However, Bradley espouses this conception, Eliot explains, to show that a thinking, feeling individual might transcend the one for the many, joining the catholicity of ordered experience through (structured) tradition.

On one side the history of the world is the history of my experience, on the other my experience itself is largely ideal, and requires the existence of much which falls outside of itself. Experience is certainly more real than anything else, but any experience demands reference to something real which lies outside *that* experience. (KE 21)

The real that lies outside oneself, Eliot determines through Bradley, must be the real of an objective tradition, and the objective is necessarily created and ordered by language. This enduring sense of transcendent tradition is expressed clearly by Eliot in part II of *The Dry Salvages*:

I have said before,  
That the past experience revived in the meaning  
Is not the experience of one life only  
But of many generations – not forgetting  
Something that is probably quite ineffable:  
(CP 195)

The accretion of more experiences than could be obtained within one, isolated lifetime is made possible, then, through a transcendence of the isolation of the mere self, for the ineffable community of “many generations” and their resultant tradition and culture.

There is an intrinsic tension within Eliot’s criticism and poetry between philosophy and art, “between – to use the terminology of the idealists – the satisfaction of the intellect and the satisfaction of feeling” (Mallinson 2). A satisfaction of the intellect reconciled with a satisfaction of feeling and faith (and a reconciliation of both within language) is a prominent poetic agenda in Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, and these seemingly antithetical satisfactions are approached by Eliot through a sustained dialectic of structure and anti-structure; a dialectic with deep roots in Eliot’s Bradleyan dissertation, roots ultimately predicated on the role of a lettered

tradition in forming and ordering objective reality. “[W]e seem to have an idea for each word,” Eliot writes, “The actual idea judged, it is true, is unique, or the judgment would not be made, but the judgment is made only through universal connections” (*KE* 45).

Eliot continues, arguing for the ability to transcend the limitations of language through a community of concepts:

The development of language is the history of our exploration of the world of concepts. The goal of language is in this sense unattainable, for it is simply that of a complete vocabulary of concepts, each independent of the rest; and all of which, by their various combinations, would give complete and final knowledge – which would, of course, be knowledge without a knower. (*KE* 46)

There can, for Eliot and Bradley, be no single knower of complete and final knowledge of the Absolute, only through a personal transcendence predicated on a veneration of accumulated tradition can solipsistic points of view be malleable to the extent of a new perception of idealized concepts outside of one’s self. “For we vary,” Eliot concludes, “by passing from one point of view to another [...] we vary by self-transcendence” (*KE* 147).

The stain left on Eliot’s mind by Bradley’s metaphysical method generated a lifelong veneration of tradition within Eliot that is evinced from his doctoral thesis to the end of his public career – veneration for a tradition created and hampered by, yet ultimately entrusted to, language. Necessarily limited yet eminently powerful, language, Eliot believed, has the ability to create and order the means by which one might engage with the cultural, theosophical, and mystical material necessary to experience the Absolute and to apprehend the presence of the divine within one’s life. Accordingly, to Eliot’s conscience, the concerns of the philosopher and theologian, in what he believed to be a spiritually diminished age, were most powerfully actualized in the business of the poet. Thus Eliot, in choosing a medium for the expression of his philosophical and religious beliefs, casts his lot as a man of letters in England rather than as an

academic philosopher in America, choosing to take on the public life of a poet of vision, a poet invested in discovering and illuminating out of disparate sources the path of the soul to an immediate, profound, and supernatural apprehension of the Word within the waste land of the modern spiritual condition.

## X

In his intellectual and emotional pursuit of experience of the Absolute, Eliot, through his university studies and over the course of his life, encountered and cultivated two seemingly antithetical strategies for transcending the limitations of the apparent world and apprehending the divine; strategies predicated in the existentially horrifying and the ecstatically sublime. Eliot discovered, through the systematically repudiative and metaphysically evacuative philosophy of Nāgarjuna's Mādhyamikanism, the strength to endure and embrace the abysmally vacuous void, discovering in the complete absence of god a transcendent intimation of the ecstasy of his presence. From the metaphysics of F. H. Bradley, Eliot developed an appreciation for the accumulative capacity and authority of cultural, lettered tradition to objectively order and actualize the transcendent awakening of a supernatural life of the spirit from out of the seeming husk of modern spiritual torpor. The structure of a transcendent tradition - a tradition he considered perfected in the poetry of Dante Alighieri - and the anti-structure of a metaphysic that could kindle the divine spark out of the negative way of "annihilation and utter night," became a unified dialectic of seeming opposites for Eliot. It became, upon the maturation of a lifetime of consideration, a dialectic by which he could, as a fully realized poet of religious conviction and vision, display and explore his own religious and theosophical beliefs, and attempt to awaken what he perceived to be a spiritually desiccated age, poetically revivifying for Christian

expression the experience of the supernatural within the dilapidated machine of modern existence through the vatic swan song of the *Four Quartets*.

## Chapter 2

### *Dantescan Structure and Nāgarjunan Anti-Structure in T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets.*

#### I

T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1935-42) are expressions of Eliot's Anglican faith and abiding philosophical concerns, made outside the idiom of liturgy. Written at the close of his public career as a poet, the *Quartets* offer deeply personal explorations of Eliot's religious beliefs and skeptical doubts, delivered in language evolved from the more overtly biblical diction of earlier religious poems such as *Ash Wednesday* (1930) and *Choruses from 'The Rock'* (1934). Eliot's *Quartets* are poems as anxious as they are celebratory, connecting his early interests in and concerns with philosophy to the spiritual revelations of his Anglican life in a manner that resists dogmatic and liturgical limitations of either his language or his emotional range.<sup>32</sup> The objectified apparent world – constructed and thus limited, Eliot believed, through faulty language – required transcendence to perceive the divine. This notion of necessary transcendence remained an enduring concern of Eliot's from his academic philosophical training at Harvard and

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<sup>32</sup> Eliot, on 11 November 1931 – a year after completing *Ash Wednesday* and four years prior to completing *Burnt Norton* – issued what Christopher Ricks describes as an “acknowledgement, a distinction, a warning,” in what can be read as a prefiguration of his authorial choice to move away from the overtly liturgical language of *Ash Wednesday* (*IMH* xxvi). In writing to I. A. Richards of his penchant for poetic allusion and preference for poems of interpretive fluidity, Eliot states:

As for the allusions you mention, that is perfectly deliberate, and it was my intention that the reader should recognize them. As for the question why I made the allusions at all, that seems to me definitely a matter which should not concern the reader [*amended from* author]. That, as you know, is a theory of mine, that very often it is possible to increase the effect for the reader by letting him know [*half deleted*] a reference or a meaning; but if the reader knew more, the poetic effect would actually be diminished; that is the reader knows too much about the crude material in the author's mind, his own reaction may tend to become at best merely a kind of feeble image of the author's feelings, whereas a good poem should have the potentiality of evoking feelings and associations in the reader of which the author is wholly ignorant. I am rather inclined to believe, for myself, that my best poems are possibly those which evoke the greatest number and variety of interpretations surprising to myself. (The Library of Magdalene College, Cambridge)

Oxford throughout his life as a professional poet and literary critic. The spiritual limitations of the apparent world and the strategies by which those limitations might be overcome remained central subjects for consideration from Eliot's Bradleyan thesis to his *Four Quartets*.

The philosophical notions of structure and anti-structure are Eliotic strategies for apprehending the divine through a transcendence of the apparent, objectified world. Developed out of Eliot's qualifications of Bradleyan and Nāgarjūnan metaphysics, structured and anti-structured strategies for self-transcendence formed a dialectic of Eastern and Western metaphysical approaches to enlightenment for Eliot that would come to bear, as many as three decades past his time spent as an academic philosopher, on the philosophical and religious meditations performed within his *Four Quartets*.<sup>33</sup> Following the poems' most frenetic moment of philosophical and spiritual crisis, Eliot conjures the Dantescan and the Nāgarjūnan explicitly together, foregrounding the metaphysical dialectic of transcendence that leads the poems out of the apprehensive limitations of *Burnt Norton* and the existential crisis of *East Coker* into the spiritual transcendence of *The Dry Salvages* and, in particular, *Little Gidding*:

We are only undeceived

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<sup>33</sup> Eliot's conception of the public and important "Life of the Poet" helps to account for the appearance of the philosophical concerns of his academic thesis within his final poetic publications, his *Four Quartets*. In preparing for the W. B. Yeats memorial lecture of 1940, Eliot was affected and influenced by Yeats' sense of his own life and career as an active production through his poetry of a Poet's Life, a production Eliot lauded as requiring "exceptional honesty and courage" (Olney 4). "The work," Eliot espoused, "and the man himself as poet, have been of the greatest significance" (Olney 5). Eliot, like Yeats, came to understand the poet's life work – when truly great – as transcending the individual person to become a matter of public cultural record, incorporated into the tradition of Western letters that stretched, as Eliot described in *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1919), from Homer onward. Eliot's fascination with Yeats' powerful public production of his Poet's Life and remarkable ability to "dream back" over his entire career in his final poetic publications, as James Olney writes in his essay "Life of the Poet," bloomed during the final years of Eliot's work on his *Quartets* – poems, Olney reemphasizes, that famously exhibit a number of explicit Yeatsian allusions and invocations (Olney 5). Eliot's religious conversion (the end result, as he described it, of his skeptical philosophical explorations) was a powerful biographical moment vivifying the poetry of his later years. Eliot's own sense of the desirability of being able to read back over his own life at the close of his Poet's Life illuminates an impetus for the appearance of the abiding philosophical concerns fomented in his academic years and pursued throughout his life as a poet – the spiritual limitations of the apparent, objectified world and the means to transcend them – within the expression of his Anglican faith and culmination of his public poetic career.

Of that which, deceiving, could no longer harm.  
 In the middle, not only in *the middle of the way*  
 But all the way, *in a dark wood*, in a bramble, [emphasis mine]  
 (CP 185)

Nāgarjuna's Middle Way and Dante's dark wood are here commingled as reference points for the journey out of deception and into enlightenment; they are at once opposites and correlatives in a singular quest, Eliotic examples of these dual voices informing the spirit's search for the enlightening, transcendent still point of the turning world.

Eliot perceived philosophical anti-structure as the repudiative notion of Nāgarjuna's *via negativa*, a highly skeptical metaphysic by which transcendent enlightenment may be achieved through a complete philosophical emptying of self. Antithetically, he conceived of philosophical structure, a notion derived from his intensive post-graduate studies of Bradley's pragmatic metaphysics, as the concatenation of Western tradition, thought, and belief. It was a cultural inheritance, Eliot came to believe, that led to the apotheosis of religious inspiration predicated on the achievements and prevailing sentiments of Western literary and religious tradition, a tradition Eliot deemed perfected, philosophically and poetically, in the *Commedia* of Dante Alighieri.

## II

Much has been made of Eliot's abiding admiration for the elegance and purity of Dante's language and poetry, and the influence of that admiration upon his own life and work. "One test of the great masters," Eliot wrote in an essay entitled *What Dante Means to Me*, "is that the appreciation of their poetry is a lifetime's task, because at every stage of maturing – and that should be one's whole life – you are able to understand them better. Among these are Shakespeare, Dante, Homer and Virgil" (*IMH* 391). Eliot venerated Dante above all other poets for the graceful, integrated structure of his philosophy and the spare clarity of his verse. No

other poet in the Western canon, Eliot felt, was as timelessly accomplished or as centrally important to the religious and literary traditions of Europe. Eliot wrote in 1961 of his enduring appreciation for Dante's poetry and the influential role it played throughout his life,

There is one poet [...] who impressed me profoundly when I was twenty-two and with only a rudimentary acquaintance with his language started to puzzle out his lines, one poet who remains the comfort and amazement of my age although my knowledge of his language remains rudimentary. [...] the poet I speak of is Dante. In my youth, I think that Dante's astonishing economy and directness of language – his arrow that goes unerringly to the centre of the target – provided for me a wholesome corrective to the extravagances of the Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Caroline authors in whom I also delighted. (*IMH* 391)

Eliot believed Dante was the apex of Western religious and literary tradition, a writer whose poetry was perfected by the presiding Catholic structure of belief informing the nature and material of his thoughts. The unified cultural and literary sensibility of his Christian expression within the *Commedia* was, for Eliot, an example of the means by which an elegantly and impersonally structured metaphysic predicated on venerated tradition could facilitate a transcendence of the temporal, spatial, and spiritual limitations of the apparent world, leading to an apprehension of the divine out of the terrestrial chaos of mortal existence.

Humanity, Eliot believed, lacked the means to perceive the divine directly out of the inherent limitations of a world of appearances comprised of objects constructed, as argued in his thesis, from the compromised building blocks of imperfect language. Eliot, in citing an example of Dante's genius, offers a passage from the *Purgatorio* revealing his perception of Dantescan theosophical structure, admired through the lens of his own Bradleyan sense of transcendent tradition, as a means by which to elude the spiritual limitations of the apparent world. Eliot writes:

The meeting with Sordello *a guisa di leon quando si posa*, like a couchant lion, is no more affecting than that with the poet Statius, in Canto XXI. Statius, when he

recognizes his master Virgil, stoops to clasp his feet, but Virgil answers – the lost soul speaking to the saved:

*‘Frate,  
non far, chè tu se’ ombra, ed ombra vedi’.*  
*Ed ei surgendo: ‘Or puoi la quantitate  
comprender dell’ amor ch’a te mi scalda,  
quando dismento nostra vanitate,  
trattando l’ombre come cosa salda.’*  
*‘Brother! refrain, for you are but a shadow, and a shadow is but what you see.’ Then the  
other, rising: ‘Now can you understand the quantity of love that warms me towards you,  
so that I forget our vanity, and treat the shadows like the solid thing.’<sup>34</sup> (SP 219)*

Eliot’s selection from Dante’s *Purgatorio* finds a suppliant Statius venerating his poetic master and Dante’s “il miglior fabbro” in a world of shadows resonant with Eliot’s philosophical notion of the apparent world. Chided by Virgil that his is a shade’s perception of a shade, Statius exalts in a transcendence of Virgil’s claimed limitations of perceptions through an expression of love for his master that supersedes his vain self. They transcend their apparitional state through a veneration of tradition that renders both poets “solid things.” It is important to note that this transcendence of state is achieved by Statius’s veneration of Virgil, rather than through Virgil’s own genius. Through a veneration of his master and his master’s place in the lineage of tradition, Dante’s Statius, in looking backwards in reverence, eludes the limitations of his corporeal and spiritual nothingness, thus - through his impersonal reverence for one of the great poetic contributors to the Western (later Christian) canon - elevating both himself and his master from apparitional to real.

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<sup>34</sup> Christopher Ricks notes, “In the Temple Classics translation (this, reprinted 1909, was TSE’s edition when he was young, and his copy is in the Houghton Library): “‘Brother, do not so, for thou art a shade and a shade thou seest.” And he, rising: “Now canst thou comprehend the measure of the love which warms me toward thee, when I forget our nothingness, and treat shades as a solid thing.”” T. S. Eliot again quoted this passage in his Clark Lectures (1926), *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* (ed. Ronald Schuchard, 1993, p.88)” (*IMH* 4). The difference of translation between “vanity” and “nothingness” from Eliot’s two versions of the *Purgatorio* is also of interest, as the notion of self and emptiness are each offered as Virgilian descriptions of a purgatorial state within a world of shadows – notions of a spiritual condition that recall the second half of Eliot’s dialectic of transcendence, his Nāgarjuna consideration of an obliteration of self as a metaphysical strategy for perceiving the divine out of the clarifying abyss.

The Western tradition of Christianity was the answer to Eliot's spiritual and philosophical unease, and Dante's poetry, he believed, was the most perfect invocation of that tradition in European history. Believing he lived in a spiritually desiccated age, Eliot felt a powerful need to return a catholic and classic sensibility to modern letters and life.<sup>35</sup> Of the spiritual ills of modernity and the need for a unified tradition, Eliot writes:

The trouble of the modern age is not merely the inability to believe certain things about God and man which our forefathers believed, but the inability to *feel* towards god and man as they did. A belief in which to some extent you can still understand; but when religious feeling disappears, the words in which men have struggled to express it become meaningless. (*OP&P* 25).

In his famous essay from 1929 extolling Dante's lucidity, genius, and universality, Eliot writes at length of what he perceives as the inclusive commonality of Dante's language, as well as the structured perfection of his late-mediaeval Catholic philosophy, particularly commending the eloquent manner in which that philosophy informs Dante's writing. Simplicity of language was the foundation, in Dante, for an elegance of form that was perfected by its adherence to the equally elegant (as Eliot saw it) form and structure of the philosophy of Dante's medieval Catholicism. "[T]he philosophy is essential to the structure," Eliot wrote of his admiration for the philosophical underpinnings in Dante's *Commedia*, "and ... the structure is essential to the poetic beauty of the parts" (*SW* 160).

Eliot admired Dante's *Commedia* for its stylistic elegance and purity of form and structure. That form and structure was, he contended, all the more elegant and pure for the "perfection" of the Catholic philosophy informing it; a predication on philosophy solidifying that form and structure into an unsurpassed poetic achievement, a success to be imitated but never

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<sup>35</sup> "This goal of a unified sensibility with an underlying principle of order, both linguistic and cultural, will occupy Eliot from *The Waste Land* to *Four Quartets*. Dante served as a prime model in this quest 'to bring order to the experience of unbelief by bringing order to its language.'" (Manganiello 10)

achieved (Manganiello 4). Catholicism's ritual, splendor, and thousand-year legacy of thought and custom all gave Dante a structure within which to create unsurpassed poetry and a means by which to invoke the great traditional images and symbols of medieval Europe's dominant religion. The philosophy had a history and an arrangement of thought and imagery from which to draw both allusively and allegorically in a way that conferred a palpable gravity to the poetry of Dante's *Commedia*. "In his principle writing on Dante," Dominic Manganiello writes, "Eliot underlines his master's ability to combine stylistic with spiritual aims and to treat philosophy in terms of vision. Dante's art shows that purgation and even blessedness can be the stuff of great poetry. [...] A coherent philosophy, such as the Catholic, provides an objective system of reference for both the poet and reader" (Manganiello 3, 5).

The form of a beautiful philosophy, Eliot felt, benefits the form of beautiful language, giving it a structure within which to be most perfectly and communicably expressed. The technical scheme employed by Dante was more perfect, then, for the eternal scheme he perceived; the structure of human emotions was contained within and elevated by the scaffolding framework of Dante's medieval Catholic philosophy and faith and the widely venerated traditions it represented (Kenner 255). Eliot extols the universal greatness of this Dantescan poetic structure in the *Commedia* for its supporting predication on Catholic philosophy: "From the *Purgatorio* one learns that a straightforward philosophical statement can be great poetry; from the *Paradiso*, that more and more rarefied and remote *states of beatitude* can be the material for great poetry" (SP 217).

Eliot asserts that the grace of the philosophy behind the cantos of the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso* excel, even, the poetry of the damned for their Catholic structural foundation, claiming the last canto of the *Paradiso* to be "the highest point to which poetry has ever reached or can

ever reach” (*SP* 216). Eliot perceived, out of the inheritance of Dante’s formal and philosophical perfection of structure, an expression of the spiritually limited nature of the apparent, objectified world similar to that which he found within Nāgarjuna’s Mādhyamikanism. Perception of objects, objects whose conceptual existence relied on their creation through faulty language, was a condition of *states*. States of damnation and beatitude, or at least their philosophical recognitions, were achievable through the formal excellence of the religious structure ballasting Dante’s poetry. So too were states of damnation and beatitude perceptible within Nāgarjuna’s negative way. The repudiation of systems of thought and the complete self-evacuation advocated by Nāgarjuna’s teachings were predicated on the stripping away, through rarified states of metaphysical vacuity, of the philosophical misconceptions bred by, as Eliot believed them to be, the limitations on a spiritually enlightened existence engendered by a world of apparent objects formed by ultimately fallible language. States of grace and damnation were, to Eliot’s sensibilities, the stuff of profoundly great philosophy and poetry and his notions of structure and anti-structure, developed during his academic engagement with philosophy and refined as he moved towards his religious life as an Anglican convert, became poetic and philosophical strategies for apprehending the paths to or from those metaphysical conditions.

Despite his admitted veneration of the philosophy informing Dante’s poetry, Eliot, ever wary of committing himself too completely to a singular philosophical system, contended that the philosophy of medieval Catholicism informing the *Commedia* is beautiful insofar as it is formally adhered to, not insofar as it is expressly advocated. Eliot explains:

My point is that you cannot afford to *ignore* Dante’s philosophical and theological beliefs, or to skip the passages which express them most clearly; but that on the other hand you are not called upon to believe them yourself. It is wrong to think that there are parts of the *Divine Comedy* which are of interest only to Catholics or to mediaevalists. For there is a difference (which here I hardly do more than assert) between philosophical *belief* and poetic *assent*. [...] In reading Dante you must enter the world of thirteenth-

century Catholicism: which is not the world of modern Catholicism, as his world of physics is not the world of modern physics. You are not called on to believe what Dante believed, for your belief will not give you a groat's worth more of understanding and appreciation; but you are called upon more and more to understand it. If you can read poetry as poetry, you will 'believe' in Dante's theology exactly as you believe in the physical reality of his journey; that is, you suspend both belief and disbelief. (*SP* 221)

The philosophy informing Dante's *Commedia* was a beautiful structural source of reference for the substance and execution of the poetry, not merely an aestheticized haranguing of doctrine and faith. It was the sort of poetry, that which was predicated on a clear and eloquent tradition of metaphysical thought, that Eliot professed a "personal prejudice" for, whether based on "Aquinas, Epicurus, or" – as is of great illumination to the metaphysical sentiments of anti-structure informing Eliot's *Quartets* – "the forest sages of India" (Manganiello 7).

Dante's spare poetic language illuminated, for Eliot, the clarity and perfection of the philosophy informing it, transcending its implicit limitations in a manner far more successful than in any other's poetry. If faulty language is to communicate the means to transcend the apparent world, Eliot believed, it must be clear, inclusive, and visual; all traits he found and prized in the poetry of Dante. Eliot greatly esteemed Dante's vernacular Italian and its evocation of a more hegemonic European theatre of philosophy and religion, born, he explains, of medieval Latin, the once universal language of the learned and the artistic:

What I have in mind is, that Dante is, in a sense to be defined (for the word means little by itself), the most *universal* of poets in the modern languages [...] Dante's universality is not solely a personal matter. The Italian language, and especially the Italian language in Dante's age, gains much by being the product of universal Latin. [...] [M]odern languages *tend* to separate abstract thought (mathematics is now the only universal language); but mediaeval Latin tended to concentrate on what men of various races and lands could think together. [...]

The language of each great English poet is his own language; the language of Dante is the perfection of a common language. (*SP* 206, 217)

This traditional inclusivity of Dante's late mediaeval Italian evinced, for Eliot, the foundation for a structure of poetry and thought that attributed to his *Commedia* what Eliot felt to be its formal

perfection. Eliot similarly lauded the highly visual nature of Dante's poetry, yet another aspect he commends of Dante's European commonality of word and thought. Dante's mastery of allegory, Eliot contends, was the mastery of a form commonly recognizable and prized by the learned of his day, and reflective of the "universal" nature of Dante's poetry Eliot admired. Eliot writes of Dante's richly visual poetics:

He not only thought in a way in which every man of his culture in the whole of Europe then thought, but he employed a method which was common and commonly understood throughout Europe. [...] What we should consider is not so much the meaning of the images, but the reverse process, that which led a man having an idea to express it in images. We have to consider the type of mind which by nature and *practice* tended to express itself in allegory: and, for a competent poet, allegory means *clear visual images*. And clear visual images are given much more intensity by having a meaning – we do not need to know what that meaning is, but in our awareness of the image we must be aware that the meaning is there too. Allegory is only one poetic method, but it is a method which has very great advantages. (SP 209)

While allegory was not, for Eliot, a presiding technique in his poetry, the fashioning of multifarious interpretive possibilities from out the echoes of his disparate source materials of allusions, symbols, and images is. As Kenner notes, Eliot conceived of it as possible, on a smaller scale, to register a scheme of the ordered range of human emotions in his poetry "without employing allegorical machinery" (Kenner 256). Eliot may resist allegory in his executions of this poetic "schematic," but a kaleidoscope of familiar interpretive possibilities, the likes of which he so heartily approves of in Dante's allegories, pervades the poetry of his own *Four Quartets*, allowing for the metaphysical dialectic of the disparate structured and unstructured philosophies within his own poetic expressions of faith.

Scholarship concerning Eliot's debts to Dante occasionally attempts to portray Eliot's oeuvre as an imitation of Dante's *Commedia*, citing *The Waste Land* as Eliot's *Inferno*, *Ash Wednesday* as his *Purgatorio*, and the *Four Quartets* – particularly *Little Gidding* – as his *Paradiso*. While *Little Gidding*, along with the rest of the *Quartets*, undoubtedly shows the

influence of distinctly Dantescan modes of style and thought, scholarly assertions that the *Quartets* or *Little Gidding* are straight, imperfectly executed, “imitations” of Dante do not account for the entirety of the matter. In a poem as vastly allusive and polyvocal as the *Four Quartets*, it seems somewhat reductive to read the echoes of Dante in Eliot’s poems as stand-alone imitations of a singular authorial and poetic voice, regardless of Eliot’s abiding admiration for Dante. The Dantescan strains floating through the *Four Quartets* are, rather than homages to or even pantomimes of Dante’s genius, examples of Eliotic vocalizations within the greater philosophical and linguistic dialogues of the poems. When heard in the relative concordance and discordance of its duet of enmity within the *Quartets* with the simultaneous Eliotic vocalizations of Nāgarjuna’s Mādhyamika Buddhism, Eliot’s evocation of the framework and scaffolding of Dante’s medieval system of formulaic and philosophical structure materializes more clearly as a conjured voice in a dialogue, rather than a model for imitation.

### III

Though the influence of both are traceable through the four poems of the *Four Quartets*, the seemingly-at-odds strains of Dantescan structure and Nāgarjunan anti-structure that inform Eliot’s work exist as a concordant dialogue of harmonies and discords, not a philosophical competition; they are contrapuntal, not a cacophony. In counterpoint, each voice has a separate, distinctly interesting line; these are played simultaneously, interacting and interweaving, and while they retain their separateness they have to tessellate harmoniously, in order not to be unlistenable, and it is in this way that the Eliotic dialogue of structure and anti-structure conducts itself throughout the poems. If *Four Quartets* is, like its predecessor *The Waste Land*, a journey of the soul on a linguistic and philosophical quest to find spiritual enlightenment and the words

by which to express such, then that journey is moved and informed by these two philosophies of structure and anti-structure as the *Quartets* play out.

Eliot's *Quartets* begin this spiritual exploration of anxiety and ecstasy, philosophy and spirituality in the midst of the linguistic and referential limitations of the fallibly constructed world of appearances. The mysterious rose garden of *Burnt Norton*, with its uncertain voices, indeterminate referents, ghostly children, and ethereal echoes, is the starting point for Eliot's journey of the soul; it is a poetic representation of the spiritually limited world of objectified, temporal appearances, filled with intimations of the allusive and the spiritual yet permeated with linguistic and metaphysical uncertainties. The temporal limitations of "time present," "time past" and "time future" are experienced in the first lines of the poem, and considered throughout the five sections.<sup>36</sup> Out of the allusively rich, yet incoherent descriptions of the self-generating and self-emptying pool and the spiritual and philosophical commingling of the "lotos rose," *Burnt Norton* moves, in its first section, through considerations of the inheritance and limitations of "unredeemable" time into the poems' first intimations of enlightened transcendence, the invocation within section II of the "still point of the turning world."

Already, echoes of Nāgarjūnan and Dantescan thought begin to make themselves heard as *Burnt Norton* moves from considerations of the rose garden to those of the still point. After the communion of the Catholic rose of heaven and Buddhism's thousand-petaled lotus within the first garden, a similar commingling of Dantescan and Nāgarjūnan imagery can be recognized in Eliot's treatment of the "still point of the turning world," simultaneously recognizable as the

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<sup>36</sup> "Any object," Eliot writes in his thesis, "which is wholly real is independent of time" (*KE* 110). An independence from time the likes of which Eliot desires in the *Quartets* requires, in his belief, a collapsation of one's recognition of the real and the ideal notions of linguistically constructed objects into singular, and transcendent, recognitions of those distinctions as inveterately false, thereby achieving immediate experience of an absolute, out of time.



Having illuminated the linguistic limitations of both words and their construction of the apparent world, and introduced the Dantescan and Nāgarjunan dialectic of structured and unstructured philosophical enlightenment, Eliot moves his *Quartets* into a crescendo of spiritual anxiety within *East Coker*. “In the beginning is my end,” begins *East Coker*, suggestive – in its recognition of the physical falsehood of metaphysical states – of Nāgarjuna’s maxim, “Samsāra is nothing essentially different from nirvāna. Nirvāna is nothing essentially different from samsāra.” Reminiscent of the “darkness and utter night” Eliot admitted to suffering in his graduate thesis, *East Coker* resonates with the palpable anxiety of a spirit trapped in the material world of appearances; an anxiety that must be transcended for the *Quartets* to move forward.

There is, it seems to us,  
 At best, only a limited value  
 In the knowledge derived from experience.  
 The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,  
 For the pattern is new in every moment  
 And every moment is a new and shocking  
 Valuation of all we have been. We are only undeceived  
 Of that which, deceiving, could no longer harm.  
 (CP 185)

This is the spiritual angst of Eliot’s academic youth, the emotional and intellectual perturbation he felt before philosophy and skepticism brought him to his Anglican conversion – the apprehension of transcendence he aims to express in his *Four Quartets*.

Following Eliot’s clearest invocation of Dantescan and Nāgarjunan allusion in the entire *Quartets* – “In the middle, not only in the middle of the way / But all the way, in a dark wood, in a bramble” – *East Coker* achieves its spiritual crisis and its material ends, prefiguring the forthcoming journey of the soul, on Dantescan and Nāgarjunan terms, towards the sublime ecstasy of *Little Gidding*.

Do not let me hear  
 Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly,

Their fear and frenzy, their fear of possession,  
 Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God.  
 The only wisdom we can hope to acquire  
 Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.

The houses are all gone under the sea,

The dancers are all gone under the hill.  
 (CP 185)

After this moment of doubt, followed by section III's list of patrons, statesmen, rulers, civil servants, chairmen, lords, and contractors who have all gone into the "dark dark dark" of mortal failure, Eliot's poetic speaker masters itself and its fear in a decidedly Nāgarjunan moment of self-evacuation, beginning to transcend the litany of failures: "I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you / Which shall be the darkness of God" (186).

Eliot's next line speaks of the darkness of a theatre when a scene is to be changed, and here too a scene is changing, for once *East Coker* has born witness to the material ends of Eliot's poetic speaker, the soul's journey of enlightened transcendence can truly begin. The self-mastery of Eliot's speaker's soul continues, echoing Nāgarjunan exhortations to desist from philosophical interiority, as one cannot predicate the journey of the soul on the faulty machinations of earthly convictions,

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope  
 For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love  
 For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith  
 But the faith and love and the hope are all in the waiting.  
 Wait without thought for you are not ready for thought:  
 So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.  
 (CP 186)

After Eliot's speaker has embraced the dark emptiness out of which his journey of the soul can begin, *The Dry Salvages* finds the nature of that journey delicately moved through tradition into increasingly Christian expressions. Sea-faring and river working traditions are

explored as Eliot's speaker progresses from seeming spiritually foundered to a growing apprehension of the death of death and time in the Annunciation and Incarnation of Jesus. "I do not know much about gods;" Eliot's speaker confesses in the third *Quartet's* opening lines. The voice continues, in terms reminiscent of Eliot's academic considerations of metaphysics as merely incomplete frontiers to be pushed at,

but I think that the river  
Is a strong brown god—sullen, untamed and intractable,  
Patient to some degree, at first recognized as a frontier;  
Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyor of commerce;  
Then only a problem confronting the builder of bridges.  
The problem once solved, the brown god is almost forgotten  
By the dwellers in cities—ever, however, implacable,  
Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder  
Of what men choose to forget. Unhonoured, unpropitiated  
By worshippers of the machine  
(CP 191)

Eliot's language here is also evocative of his later convictions that religion was lamentably forgotten in his own modern age, a condition to be personally transcended through his dialectic of Dantescan and Nāgarjunan philosophies. This dialectic continues to lead his speaker within *The Dry Salvages* through an awareness of the Annunciation (in section II), a consideration of Krishna (in section III), and an exaltation of the Incarnation (section V) on his way to the ecstatic climax of *Little Gidding*.

*The Dry Salvages* ends with the implications of Eliot's speaker's journey from spiritually foundered to shored against the rock of the Incarnate God.

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 are conquered, and reconciled  
(CP 199)

With an awareness of the Incarnate God, achieved over the course of Eliot's dialectic of the Dantescan and Nāgarjunan throughout his *Quartets*, Eliot's speaker can suddenly apprehend things that Eliot protested to be impossible in his doctoral thesis: the union of individual spheres (Bradley's finite centers, Eliot's points of view) and the reconciliation of time (*KE* 147).

Eliot's speaker's poetic journey of the soul through the *Four Quartets* concludes ecstatically with *Little Gidding*. "There is no earth smell," we are told, "Or smell of living thing." This is the *Quartet* of the spirit, and the spirit's culmination in the sublime ecstasy of religious expression and an apprehension of the Absolute. Upon arrival we are instructed, in terms now overtly Nāgarjunan and Dantescan,

If you came this way,  
 Taking any route, starting from anywhere,  
 At any time or at any season,  
 It would always be the same: you would have to put off  
 Sense and notion. You are not here to verify,  
 Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity  
 Or carry report. You are here to kneel  
 Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more  
 Than an order of words, the conscious occupation  
 Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.  
 And what the dead had no speech for, when living,  
 They can tell you, being dead: the communication  
 Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.  
 (*CP* 201)

The journey of the soul towards enlightenment, has delivered Eliot's speaker to its natural ends, the precipice of immediate experience of the divine. "Sense and notion" have been Nāgarjunanly dispensed with and the speaking self has delivered itself up to the venerated tradition of prayer in a Dantescan communion with the dead and judged who now communicate in a language "tongued with fire."

This image of flame benefits from structured, Dantescan allusions contrapuntally enriched by the informing philosophy of Mādhyamika. The flames displayed in Eliot's *Quartets*

are often rich with allusion to the *Inferno*'s horned tongues of flame encasing an unseen Ulysses, classical literature and Dante's ultimate journeyer, damned for his verbal duplicitousness. If structure and anti-structure, as posited, are lenses through which the prefiguration of language and truth are traced through these Eliotic voices of harmonizing discord, then Ulysses, alternately the silver-tongued hero of the ancient Greeks and the fork-tongued scourge of fallen Troy, and the flames in which he is punished, are particularly rich images through which to conceive of this linguistic interplay of epigrammatic and theoretic dualities informing Eliot's *Quartets*' search for the language on which to predicate, if possible, a spiritual journey of enlightenment. As Eliot's voices, in making beginnings of their ends, search for truth and the language with which to evoke it, so too did Ulysses strive beyond the measure of all men in his odyssey for knowledge. The tongues of flame, then, as the means by which Ulysses is punished in hell, are even more allusively powerful within the *Quartets* for the influence of Mādhyamikan philosophy within their vocalization throughout the poems. They are the tortured condition not only of one who has misused language and abused truth in the manner of Dante's Ulysses, they are the natural and universal condition of *samsāra* plaguing all men who predicate their endeavors on fallible and uncertain language, the progenitor of half-truths and discontent outside of the still point of the wheel. Eliot thus provides a collapsibility of image, interpretation, and symbolism that foregrounds the structural and philosophical inheritance of these conjurations of Dante and Nāgarjuna within both the form and matter of the poetry, evincing the authority of both – the structure to collapse, and the anti-structure of collapsibility – as means of transcendence.

*Little Gidding*, and with it Eliot's *Four Quartets*, invokes in its final lines both Dante and Nāgarjuna, and, moving towards the final imagistic and symbolic inheritance of their internally commingled collapse, Eliot enigmatically makes of his journey's end:

A condition of complete simplicity  
 (Costing not less than everything)  
 And all shall be well  
 All manner of things shall be well  
 When the tongues of flame are in-folded  
 Into the crowned knot of fire  
 And the fire and the rose are one.  
 (CP 209)

The dialogues of structure and anti-structure lacing *Four Quartets* create a linguistic and poetic kaleidoscope into which the temporalities, symbolisms, and philosophies of *Four Quartets* ultimately in-fold and from which they reemerge, reformed and transcendent. Patterns are in flux, creating and recreating themselves in context and opposition with one another, complex and musical. There are, finally, two different ways to transcend the apparent limitations of existence for the still point of the turning world; Dante's framework and structure of a journey up towards the empyrean, the rose of heaven, and Nāgarjuna's internal, personal enlightenment through divestation of theory and language, rendering one internally changed in a way that reveals oneself at the center, though nothing has changed but one's perspective. As *Little Gidding* reaches its climax, the rich, fraught images of the rose and the flame, carefully and enigmatically infused with these tessellated strains of the Dantescan and Nāgarjunan throughout the *Quartets*, collapse into each other in the poem's last line in a way that transcendentally and contrapuntally meld into one ineffable arrangement of uncrystalized and profoundly enigmatic allusions that at once inform, controvert, and exalt in the dialectic implications of the journey of the spirit towards truth that Eliot has orchestrated throughout his *Four Quartets*: the rose and the flame are

one; heaven's still point of enlightened truth and the internal journey of spirit and perspective are collapsed into one another and the sublime ecstasy of the divine may be apprehended.

### *Conclusion*

T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* is a poetic exploration and expression of spiritual, Christian transcendence, seeking to originate a purified, non-dogmatic manner in which to reveal the compositional potentiality for an immediate experience of the divine out of the objectified world of appearances. It is a man of faith's reconciliation of his religion with his life as a man of letters, an attempted dual transcendence of both the secular, physical world and its base generative material of fallible words. F. R. Leavis apprehends the positive and negative means by which Eliot achieves his original religious and theosophical expressions within his *Quartets*:

Eliot is known as professing Anglo-Catholicism and classicism; but his poetry is remarkable for the extraordinary resource, penetration and stamina with which it makes its explorations into the concrete actualities of experience below the conceptual currency; into the life that must be the *raison d'être* of any frame – while there is life at all. With all its positive aspiration and movement, it is at the same time essentially a work of radical analysis and revision, endlessly insistent in its care not to confuse the frame with the living reality, and heroic in its refusal to accept.

(Leavis 124)

With the poetic dialectic of Dantescan structure and Nāgarjunan anti-structure descanting poignantly throughout its movements, Eliot's *Quartets* makes spiritual and poetic use of the commonality of tradition and the singularity of perfect metaphysical emptiness to elude the limitations of the material plane, achieving a transcendence of self that, for Eliot, culminated in a “new and more than personal” life of the spirit, realized in his Anglican conversion and Christian awakening (Leavis 124).

In thinking about Eliot in this way we can, looking beyond the material culture that he did or did not appreciate towards his self-espoused interests in matters of the spirit, recover a

means by which to talk about his time and temporality. In viewing Eliot's *Quartets* as an attempted transcendence of material history we can sharpen the historical specificity of his life, lived through two World Wars, with their attendant social and political aftermath, and the birth of the "modern" from the death of the Victorian. We can, in this way, connect Eliot's spiritual concerns and philosophical explorations to his own "blood," "artery" and "lymph."<sup>37</sup>

An investigation of the employment of both Eastern and Western traditions of theosophical thought, predicated on a recognition of the unifying opposition of each within the poetic and philosophical dialectic Eliot conducts throughout his *Quartets*, reveals the totalizing conception of the great philosophical whole of the Absolute that he held: the conception of an apprehension of the Absolute as approachable only through the limited frontiers of necessarily incomplete and imperfect metaphysics. In combining the philosophies of Bradley and Nāgarjuna into a dialectical interplay of structure and anti-structure, Eliot developed a poetic and theosophical strategy for a more complete metaphysical and religious approach to an immediate experience of the divine through a conceptual broadening of his metaphysical frontiers.

In arranging his sustained dialectic of structure and anti-structure within the *Quartets*, Eliot organizes not only a contest of the spiritual and the material, but also of their component parts – a contest between the overly static, imperfectly conceived images that language misleadingly crystallizes, and the ineffably sublime concepts that might be formed from that same language. Structure and anti-structure in this sense afford the transcendence of both the "darkness and utter night" of the apparent world and its component materials, namely objects,

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<sup>37</sup> Eliot recognizes and locates the spiritual within the physical in *Burnt Norton* when he writes:

The trilling wire in the blood  
 Sings below inveterate scars  
 Appeasing long forgotten wars.  
 The dance along the artery  
 The circulation of the lymph  
 Are figured in the drift of stars  
 (CP 177)

via a strategic fusion of Eastern and Western theosophy, towards the ends of expressing and vivifying concepts rather than static images, dogmas or liturgies (*KE* 31). The lotos-rose and the flame transcend themselves just as the spirit must transcend itself – words transcend their limiting fixity to become concepts and concepts lead Eliot, by way of Bradley and Dante’s tradition and Nāgarjuna’s *via negativa*, to a transcendent apprehension of the divine within both the great intellectual and emotional lineage of his Western Christianity and the perceptive possibilities of the complete metaphysical and philosophical self-evacuation cultured in his Eastern education.

Eliot’s early philosophical engagements are of distinct importance for the religious ethics of his *Four Quartets*. Eliot’s knowledge of Eastern and Western philosophy was neither casually nor haphazardly evinced within his poetry. Rather, the poetic and theosophical concomitance of Bradleyan and Dantescan structure alongside Nāgarjunan anti-structure allowed Eliot to more fully engage with both his religious sentiments and his preferred mode of expressing them, his poetry. Rather than becoming an academic philosopher, Eliot chose to become a poet, feeling that such disparate metaphysical frontiers might be more effectively and importantly synthesized towards the ends of a more powerful expression of the Absolute through poetry. “It is only in some sense in ideas that concepts exist;” Eliot concluded in his thesis, “and, in a sense, the pointing of the ideas at the concept constitutes the reality of the concept; its reality consists of the self-transcendence of the ideas” (*KE* 40). Concepts transcending the ideas that formed them, and poetics transcending their underpinning philosophies, were the means by which Eliot felt that an experience of the divine and an expression of transcending the insecurities, anxieties, and agonies of material world was most potently possible. It was through the dialectic of structure and anti-structure, matured from graduate thesis to vatic swan song, that Eliot poetically evinced

and expressed for himself the legitimate spiritual potentiality of an immediate and enlightening experience of the divine within his *Four Quartets*.

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