

***The Art of T.S. Eliot.* Helen Gardner. New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1959.
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Abbreviations:

FQ: Four Quartets

BN: Burnt Norton

DS: Dark Salvages

EC: East Coker

LG: Little Gidding

Chapter ONE: Auditory Imagination

F.O. Matthieson and F.R. Leavis are recognized as the authoritative critics of Eliot's earlier poetry.

Gardner finds the FQ to be TSE's masterpiece; they thus form the beginning and center of her criticism.

The central distinguishing quality of a major poet is the use of language; Eliot has made us conscious of the potentialities of the language which we make dull by our common use.

There is a special feeling for the connections of words in sound and meaning; this leads him to create an idiom and a rhythm that are new and individual, but which become classic.

Eliot refers to "the auditory imagination" as follows: 'the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end. It works through meanings, certainly, or not without meanings in the ordinary sense, and fuses the old and obliterated and the trite, the current, and the new and surprising, the most ancient and the most civilized mentality.'

BN, EC, and LG each opens its final movement (V) with a consideration of words.

- BN gives a philosophical consideration of the nature of words: the word, like a musical note, has meaning only in relation to other words.

Since contexts/usages change, the life of a word is a continual death; yet within a pattern (poem) it is stable, not in itself, but in relation to all the other words in the poem.

- EC takes a practical approach in stressing the poet's inevitable defeat and the unpropitious circumstances of our own day.

Our age is characterized by an undigested technical vocabulary, a misuse of metaphor, a servitude to cliché.

Eliot attempts a poetic transformation of contemporary idiom.

- LG considers the mysterious union of words in poetry as a symbol/manifestation of the process by which past and future are woven together into meaning in our personal lives and in history; the word and moment are both points at which meaning is apprehended.

The poet's inevitable defeat is seen as the very condition of his existence; the intolerable wrestle with words and meaning is a type of the exploration which continually brings us back to the place where we started, to begin all over again.

DS (I) is particularly beautiful and bold in its diction, its variations of phrasing, and its rhythms.

Words/phrases appropriate to a nature-god alternate with phrases from common speech, which express a matter-of-fact view; highly emotional adjectives are followed by quite emotional ones; practical phrases are contrasted with splendid phraseology.

The contrasted elements are fused by a common rhythm; this connection rescues common speech from banality and gives it a certain dignity.

Presented is the contrast between man feeling at the mercy of his environment, which he regard with awe, and man mastering his environment, which he regards with calculation.

The rhythm at the end of the section becomes taut and firm; the emotion is concentrated in the images.

The images are of the poet's childhood: in the childish recognition of the changing seasons, we first apprehend the passage of time in our pulses.

Our basic experience is of ourselves as creatures who find ourselves part of natural order. The myth of primitive man is allied to the child's instinctive recognitions; here is the truth at the heart of the myth.

In DS (I, par. 2), the rhythm continues but the language takes on a greater force (especially verbs).

The power of Eliot's description of the variety of the sea derives from the variety of the diction: e.g., commonplace "lobsterpot," technical "seive," botanical "algae."

The final lines return to mythical expression, followed by two images o indefinable aural sensation. These images suggest the eerie menace of the sea felt inland.

At "the tolling bell" there is a change of tone and diction. To that point, the regularity of rhythm had almost lulled us by the accumulation of experiences, until the expectation of the ear is shocked.

The contrasts of the opening paragraph return: between (a) the majestic conception of time not out time (note the 'liturgical' sound of "that is and was from the beginning"), and (b) the time of our daily experience which we try to measure exactly by our instruments.

“Before the morning watch” is from Psalms: into the desolate silence of the sleepless there breaks the single sound with which the movement ends.

The variety of the diction, the union of the common word and the formal, the colloquial and the remote, the precise and the suggestive, is made possible by the strength and flexibility of the metre.

Eliot delighted to place an exotic word exactly, or to give the sudden shock which the unexpected introduction of a commonplace word/phrase can provide.

He had a natural gift for the vividly memorable phrase.

Eliot’s development in versification from his earlier poetry to the FQ involved a movement of the traditional heroic line. His effort was to discover a poetic rhythm in the most commonplace speech, which may then be capable of refinement and elevation so that it may accommodate the greatest thoughts without losing its naturalness.

In *Sweeney Agonistes*, the ear discovers a line, heavily end-stopped, often sharply divided into two halves, with four strong beats.

Deáth or life / or life or deáth

Deáth is life / and life is death

The pleasure comes in the variety of speech rhythms which can be held to this simple base.

Eliot: ‘Poetry begins, I dare say, with a savage beating s drum in a jungle.’

In FQ, Eliot develops/exploits/elaborates the musical possibilities of this metre.

The great quality of Eliot’s new verse is its rhythm’s flexibility. He employs at will rising or falling rhythms, and he can fall into the evenness of the duple or the ripple of triple rhythm, according to the particular effect he wants.

The norm to which the verse constantly returns is the form-stress line, with strong medial pause.

But Eliot has freed the metre by exercising a great liberty within the line in the number of syllables, and by using the four-stress line as a norm to depart from and return to.

There are two main obvious variations in FQ:

1. Shorter line of three stresses (e.g., BN, V);
2. Long line of six stresses (e.g., BN, II; DS, I).

The supreme merit of his new verse is the liberty it has given him to include every variety of diction, and to use the poetic as boldly as the prosaic, without any constraint. It enabled him also to express his own vision of life in a form in which that vision can be perfectly embodied: the Quartet form, which depends on the kind of rhythmic variation which the new verse made possible.

Chapter TWO: The Music of the *Four Quartets*

The very title *Four Quartets* indicates Eliot's debt to music in finding 'form' for the long poem.

Eliot: 'The properties in which music concerns the poet most nearly are the sense of rhythm and the sense of structure.'

Each of the four poems contains five movements, each with its own inner necessary structure.

In each first movement there are two contrasted but related themes, like the first and second subjects of a movement in strict sonata form:

- River and sea images in DS as symbols for two different kinds of time.
- Abstract speculation and garden experience in BN.
- Time and being outside of time in EC.
- In LG, the third par. Weaves together phrases taken from the first two in a kind of counterpointing.

In general, the first movement is built on contradictions which the poem is to reconcile.

In the second movement a single subject is handled in two boldly contrasting ways. The effect is like hearing the same melody played on a different group of instruments or elaborated in variations.

The movement opens with a highly poetical lyric passage in a traditional metrical form:

- Irregularly rhyming octosyllabics in BN and EC.
- Simplified sestina in DS; 'sestina' is a poem of six six-line stanzas, each stanza repeating the rhyme words of the first but rearranging them.
- Three lyric stanzas in LG.

This is followed by an extremely colloquial passage, in which the idea treated symbolically in the first half of the movement is developed in a conversational manner.

Comments on the second movements:

- In EC we have first a confusion in the seasons and the constellations; this turns to a flat statement of the same confusion in the lives of individual men, where the settled wisdom of old age is dismissed as a deception.
- DS laments the anonymous, the endless sum of whose lives adds up to no figure we can name, and leaves little trace but wrecks and wastage on time's ocean.
- In LG there exquisite lyric on the decay of our mortal world.

The third movement is the core of each poem, out of which reconciliation grows; it is an exploration with a twist of ideas of the first two movements.

At the close of these center movements (especially in EC and LG) the ear is prepared for the lyric fourth movement.

- BN: Two equal parts, divided by a change of mind, with no change of meter.

- EC: We seem to be standing still, waiting for something to happen, for a rhythm to break out.
- DS: A change in temper from the reflective to the hortatory, represented by a similar change of rhythm from the tentative six-stress line to the firm handling of the four-stress line.
- LG: A very definite break as the poet changes from the personal to the historic; he also turns to a beautiful three-stress line.

The fourth movement is brief and lyrical.

The fifth movement recapitulates the themes of the poem with personal and topical applications and resolves the contradictions of the first movement.

There are two parts in each poem, as in the second movement, but the change is slighter than in the second movement and the order is reversed: there is first a colloquial passage and then the base of the line contracts and images return in quick succession.

In various ways the last lines echo the beginning of the whole poem or employ images from the other poems in a conclusion of tender gravity, touched at times by a lyric sweetness.

In FQ, the title of the whole poem tells us nothing of its subject, and the titles of the separate poems tell us very little; the poems are not 'about places' though their subjects are bound up with particular places.

The form is central, and is inspired by the composer's power to explore and define, by continual departures from, and returns to, very simple thematic material.

The 'thematic material' of FQ is partly certain common symbols: the four elements taken as the material of mortal life:

- BN: Air, on which whispers are borne, intangible itself, but the medium of communication.
- EC: Earth, the dust of which we are made and into which we shall return.
- DS: Water, which some Greek thinkers thought was the primitive material out of which the world arose, and which man has always thought of as surrounding and embracing the land, limiting the land and encroaching on it, itself illimitable.
- LG: Fire, the purest of the elements, by which some have thought the world would end, fire which consumes and purifies.

The whole poem is about the four elements whose mysterious union makes life (noting that all four are present in each poem).

By relying on form and these underlying symbols, Eliot succeeds in handling subject in such fashion that it cannot be separated from the poem.

It is not a poem of philosophical argument, though it includes philosophical argument.

The analogy with music goes deeper than we have presently alluded to. One is constantly reminded of music by the treatment of images, which recur with constant modifications, from their context, or from their combination with other recurring images, as a phrase recurs with modification in music.

These recurring images are common, obvious, and familiar when we first meet them. As they recur they alter, as a phrase does when we hear it on another instrument, or in another key, or when it is blended and combined with another phrase, or in some way turned round, or inverted.

E.g, "sunlight":

- BN 169: "Sudden in a shaft of sunlight."

The basic image had appeared earlier in 35; similar meaning.

- At DS 208, the image has a rather different meaning.

Such rare moments are to be received in thankfulness as gifts.

- At LG 5, the image is transformed: it is made particular, linked with a season, and worked out with great descriptive detail.

It is a revelation, apocalyptic in its intensity and brilliance.

And the 'yew tree' (used frequently in *Ash Wednesday*) occurs only three times in FQ, but each time with great and different significance.

- At BN 132, the "chill fingers of yew" – the touch of death hardly brushing the cheek – give us a vague sense of foreboding.
- But DS 232 gives a sense of security. This is the familiar yew of the churchyard, symbol both of mortality and immortality, beneath whose shade we may rest in peace.
- At LG 232, the apprehension-of-love and the apprehension-of-death are linked together, so that each seems of equal validity, an apprehension-of-life.

Certain words are also used again and again, their meaning deepened or expanded by each fresh use. Indeed, FQ could be described as an exploration of the meaning of certain words.

E.g., 'end' / 'beginning':

- BN 10: 'end' alone, with vague meaning; still vague when repeated at 46.
- At BN 146, 'end' is first used with 'beginning;' only now do we begin to think of 'end' as meaning completed.
- EC 1 is an inversion of Mary Stuart's motto, which throws the stress on the word 'beginning'; the whole poem also ends with the word. EC is a poem about beginning.
- In DS, 'beginning' does not occur at all; 'end' is used only to be negated (45) for there is no 'end' without 'beginning'.

- LG uses both words and is full of synonyms for both. The refusal to speak of 'beginning' and the consequent denial of 'end' in CS make the restoration of both words in the last poem particularly moving.
 - E.g., 214-216 give a confident certainty to what had been tentative paradoxes in BN.
 - BN 173 recurs at LG 252 to give an intense poetic experience. After all the variation and turning, the discussion and development, the subject is once more, for the last time given us. It is given in the briefest possible way, with all adornment stripped away. It is the end, and we are back at the beginning; we have had this answer before, and we recognize it as the only answer.

The subject of FQ is the truth which is inseparable from the way and the life in which we find it.

Chapter THREE: Poetic Communication

It is the complexity of subject that renders the FQ obscure.

The poems do not begin with an idea; they begin with a place, a point in time, and the meaning/truth is discovered in the process of writing/reading. Eliot is moving toward meaning, not starting from it.

The sensitive variation in the use of pronouns shows the poet feeling his way towards intimacy with his audience.

In BN the actual place is hardly described at all; the movement through the FQ is from private, incommunicable experience to the concrete and the general, common experience which persons can share to some extent with each other.

BN is a poem about the 'private world' of each one of us, the world in which what might have been persists in the consciousness as well as what was, and in which the life that was actually lived by unknown people in a strange house is less real than the life we might have lived there ourselves, with our own family, if things had been different.

The difficulty of communicating this private world is reflected in the uncertain use of personal pronouns in the poem.

In EC, the village is described and there is a strong sense of a particular person speaking throughout; it is the most personal poem of the four (cf. EC 72).

The "you" of EC 25 is singular: a person is speaking to a person.

DS seems general: "we" and "you" in the plural. It is also full of anonymous crowds. Focus is on the common lot rather than on particular destinies.

In LG place and time are vividly described; references are to historical personages who have meaning for us as well as for the poet.

Communication seems well established in this poem.

Eliot is writing of religious experience in an age which has no universally held conscious formulation of belief and no accepted tradition of worship.

Eliot shows scrupulous care in using specifically religious words/symbols.

- In BN virtually no explicitly religious terminology occurs (except BN 155).
- In EC, the word "God" appears twice, without preparation (EC 96 and 113).

Eliot speaks here of our experience of the 'Other', what is not ourselves. One senses that he cannot avoid this word by which men have expressed their sense that behind otherness there is One who is Other.

Only in DS do precisely Christian words appear.

- "Annunciation" is used in a colloquial sense twice (DS 54 and 66) before being restored to its religious sense (DS 84).
- But without preparation, the single theological word in all four poems occurs in the fifth movement: "Incarnation" (DS 215).
 - The word itself is a "point of intersection" for the Christian of his/her belief in a familiar mystery with a new possibility of meaning given in the experience of the poem; for the non-believer, a word thought obsolete is rendered possibly fresh.
 - After this, it is possible in LG to naturally employ the language of Christian life (e.g., LG 46 ff., 76, 166, etc.).
- Note that even in EC IV which expounds the mystery of the cross, it does so strictly without any use of traditional Christian words/images (except for "Adam's curse" (EC 155). This is a restatement of the case of salvation with considerable imaginative power.
 - "The flame is roses" (166): an extremity of pain in which there are moments of ecstasy, when through the stifling smoke there drifts for a moment the poignant wild smell of briars.
 - "We call this Friday good" (171) gives a kind of shock.
- In DS, the lyric boldly uses the language of Christian prayer – the prayer of common folk whose lives are given meaning not by any rare/remarkable experience, but by belief.
- The hymn in DS declares the truth of Christian experience that God is love and expounds the mysterious "All shall be well" (255) from Julian of Norwich and the closing phrase of the whole poem: "The fire and the rose are one" (259).

The poet's task is to convince us that he is himself convinced. He does not seem to probatively demonstrate the truth of belief, but to convince us that what he believes does genuinely interpret and make sense of experience which we recognize as our own.

The problematic of the contemporary poet is that there is now no general cultural tradition to which the poet can refer or be referred; this is especially true of a 'religious poet'.

Much of the difficulty in Eliot's early work stems from the obscurity of his literary allusion. The difficulty of the FQ is different; it rises from the nature of his subject.

Nonetheless, in the FQ, there is a perpetual effort toward communication, a desire to speak plainly. For the reader, it is less a matter of noting allusions than it is of reading again and again until I become familiar with its manner.