

# INSIDE / OUTSIDE: ELIOT, PERSPECTIVE, AND THE MODERNIST MOMENT

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## ABSTRACT

How can the poet, confined to the ruins of contemporary history, gain the perspective required to understand it? Perception occurs in time; perspective requires a view that transcends time and place. Eliot's position, discussed in his prose and illustrated in "Gerontion" and *The Waste Land*, was that art requires a binary perspective. To be true to the moment, the poet needs a perspective within history; to understand it, he needs a perspective that transcends it. In "Gerontion," Eliot draws on the philosophy of F.H. Bradley to generate a platform from which to understand his moment; in *The Waste Land*, he draws on the work of J.G. Frazer and Jessie Weston to create a timeless reference point.

KEYWORDS: "Gerontion," *The Waste Land*, perspective / point of view, time, history.

DENTRO / FUERA: ELIOT, LA PERSPECTIVA  
Y EL MOMENTO VANGUARDISTA

## RESUMEN

¿Cómo puede el poeta, confinado en las ruinas de la historia contemporánea, adquirir la perspectiva adecuada para comprenderla? La percepción se produce en el tiempo; la perspectiva requiere una visión que trascienda el tiempo y el lugar. En este artículo sostengo que el punto de vista de Eliot, que él expuso en su prosa e ilustró en "Gerontion" y *La tierra baldía*, era que el arte requiere una perspectiva binaria. Para ser fiel al momento, el poeta necesita una perspectiva dentro de la historia; para entenderla, necesita una perspectiva que la trascienda, y necesita ambas simultáneamente. En "Gerontion", recurre a la filosofía de F.H. Bradley para generar un marco desde el que entender sus pesadillas y las de su época; en *La tierra baldía*, recurre a la obra de J.G. Frazer y a la de Jessie Weston para crear un punto de referencia eterno.

PALABRAS CLAVE: "Gerontion", *La tierra baldía*, perspectiva / punto de vista, tiempo, historia.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2022.85.02>

REVISTA CANARIA DE ESTUDIOS INGLESES, 85; octubre 2022, pp. 21-33; ISSN: e-2530-8335



Elam, Ninevah, Babylon were... beautiful vague names, and the total ruin of those worlds had as little significance for us as their very existence. But France, England, Russia, these too would be beautiful names... And we see now that the abyss of history is deep enough to hold us all. (Paul Valéry 1919, 182)

In April 1919, the *Athenaeum* published Paul Valéry's "La crise de l'esprit," a brilliant analysis of the aftermath of the Great War. Valéry maintained that the catastrophe could only be explained as a collapse of the mind of Europe, a moral and mental breakdown in which her greatest virtues had led to unimaginable evil. Eliot praised this "meditation on the decay of European civilization" as "extraordinary" and "prophetic" (Eliot 1927; Prose 2015, 156). In *The Waste Land*, he alluded to it by imagining "hooded hordes swarming / Over endless plains" and representing "Falling towers / Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London" bursting "in the violet air." (Eliot 2015, 69).<sup>1</sup>

Valéry's image of psychological and spiritual collapse struck home with Eliot, who was struggling not only with the ruins of the mind of Europe but with his own psychological breakdown. The challenge for the poet, addressed in his 1923 review of *Ulysses*, was finding a reference point that would enable artists to represent both the double nightmare of the 1919 moment and, simultaneously, the historical pattern of which it was a part. "[T]o make the modern world possible for art," contemporary artists would have to generate binary perspectives, points of view that were at the same time both inside and outside of their moment in history. In "Gerontion," Eliot drew on the philosophy of F.H. Bradley to create an epistemological image for representing an old man's collapsing mind and, concurrently, the "fractured atoms" of his whirling world; in *The Waste Land*, he drew on E.B. Tylor, J.G. Frazer, and Jessie Weston to generate a mythic platform for dealing simultaneously with the nightmares of the post-war generation and the fears that had bedeviled humans from the dawn of time.

## THE HISTORICAL SENSE

This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. (Eliot 2014, 106)

Eliot's focus on perspective began as early as 1910 with the characterization of J. Alfred Prufrock, who reflects that there will be "Time to turn back and descend the stair, / With a bald spot in the middle of my hair – / (They will say: 'How his hair is growing thin!')" (Eliot 2015, 6). In this analysis of self-consciousness, Prufrock is both descending the stair and as he does so seeing himself from above and behind, through the eyes of others. In 1914, while immersed in the epistemology of F.H. Bradley, Eliot focused more specifically on perspective and point of view as he

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Eliot's poetry in this essay are from Eliot 2015, edited by Ricks and McCue.

commenced what was to be a lifelong preoccupation with history. Despite his later remark that he was influenced primarily by Bradley's prose style, his early writing indicates that he was strongly influenced by Bradley's notion of "knowing the real," versions of which appear in his early criticism and post-war poems. Bradley begins by distinguishing between appearance and reality (the part and the whole): appearance being truth from a limited perspective, and reality truth from an ultimate perspective. Knowing the real, to the extent that it can be known, involves an awareness of the part and simultaneously of various perspectives thereon. In other words, knowing requires transcendence from chaos and disorder to perspectival platforms that simultaneously include the chaos and provide perspective on it. To illustrate the challenge of discerning truth, Bradley suggests imagining oneself suspended in space over a moving stream.

Let us fancy ourselves in total darkness hung over a stream and looking down on it. The stream has no banks, and its current is covered and filled continuously with floating things. Right under our faces is a bright illuminated spot on the water, which ceaselessly widens and narrows its area, and shows us what passes away on the current. And this spot is our now... behind our heads there is something perhaps which reflects the rays from the lit-up now... Outside this reflection is utter darkness, within it is gradual increase of brightness until we reach the illumination immediately below us. (Bradley 1897, I.54-55; quoted in Brooker 1994, 85-87)

The allegory continues, with similarities to Plato's allegory of the cave, but for present purposes, several points should be underscored. The image contains two levels: (1) the moving current with its flotsam and jetsam; and (2) the platform above the stream, momentarily fixed in place, permitting a person in the stream to view portions of it as they pass in and out of the spotlight of his "now." The objects in the stream are continuous with each other, and the stream is continuous with the bank, which is continuous with a larger area, which is in darkness, which is continuous with reality. The viewing station is an imaginary construct, a "fancy" in the mind of the knower. Being finite, he is and must remain in the stream (in time, in history). Unable to remove himself from the current, he generates an abstraction which enables him to be in the flow and achieve a limited perspective on it. The ordinary person simply flows with the current, but the poet (the philosopher, the historian) imagines a reference point that will enable him to view the stream from a binary perspective, both from within the moving stream and above it from a temporarily fixed position.

In 1919, Eliot published his landmark essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," and "Gerontion," his first major poem after completing his dissertation on Bradley. Written before the ink was dry on the Treaty of Versailles (28 June 1919), each in its own way reflects the post-war moment, and each deals with the challenge of discovering a perspective from which one could make sense of contemporary history. In these signature works, Eliot deals with the moment by imagining points of view that facilitate binary perspectives. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," he associates individual artists and their works with the moving stream, and tradition with the ideal from which they can be understood. He defines tradition as a "living



whole of all the poetry that has ever been written,” thinking of literature, as he says in 1923, “not as a collection of the writings of individuals, but as ‘organic wholes,’ as systems in relation to which, and only in relation to which, individual works have their significance” (Eliot 1919; *Prose* 2015, 106, 458). Because the individual works are part of one thing, they are systematically connected, which means that adding new works changes the whole. Paradoxically, then, the platform (tradition) is both inside and outside of time, constantly adjusting itself as new individuals enter the stream and as the critic’s awareness expands or contracts. “The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new... work of art among them.” The point of view from which one can view individual artists is generated by continuous “comparison and contrast.” The critic who puts in the “great labour” of mastering a broad range of individual artists will gain a vision of the literary tradition as unitary, simultaneous, and ideal. He will be equipped with a binary perspective, which Eliot refers to as the “historical sense... a sense of the timeless as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together” (Eliot 1919; *Prose* 2015, 106).

In “Gerontion,” Eliot creates a bewildering proliferation of perspectives by using a “Chinese box” structure of houses within houses. Each house becomes a viewpoint for understanding less comprehensive houses which randomly materialize and disappear, and in an allusion to the 1919 moment in Versailles, multiplying perspectives in a “wilderness of mirrors.” As in Bradley’s doctrine of internal relations, all of the houses are connected so that the whole (the ideal, the epistemological platform) of which they are a part is continuously changing, as new houses are added and as the speaker shifts from context to context. The speaker introduces himself in the opening lines as old and blind; as revealed by his name, he is of Greek descent. A senile Socrates, he lives in a rented house and spends his time thinking and waiting for death. His “decayed house” is located in an unkempt yard on a windy knob in post-war Europe. He is unable to see his house, not just because he has lost his sight and is losing his mind, but because he is and always has been inside. The notion that being inside a structure (a stream, a house, a moment, a life) limits perspective is a commonplace in philosophy and literature, having as a correlative the idea that understanding requires distancing oneself and, in the argument Eliot makes, perceiving both inside and outside simultaneously. But although confined within his house, Gerontion is afforded fleeting perspectives, in large part because he is a thinker, an intellectual who meanders in thought through various houses in no particular order. The most comprehensive house for understanding his post-war moment is History, which functions in the poem as Tradition does in the essay.

...Think now,  
 History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors  
 And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,  
 Guides us by vanities. Think now  
 She gives when our attention is distracted  
 And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions  
 That the giving famishes the craving. (Eliot 2015, 32)



Compounding the complexity, Gerontion associates the house of History with the womb of a seductive and deceitful whore. In the last lines, he finds that his “thousand deliberations” are no more than “Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season,” musings which “multiply variety / In a wilderness of mirrors,” largely because all of the occupants are, like himself, “Tenants of the house” (Eliot 2015, 33). As I discussed in detail in *Mastery and Escape*, the structure of “Gerontion” includes many interconnected houses, all offering perspectives on contemporary history (Brooker 1994, 81-109).

## THE MYTHICAL METHOD RECONSIDERED

Psychology... ethnology, and *The Golden Bough* have concurred to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago. Instead of the narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history... It is a step, I seriously believe, toward making the modern world possible for art. (Eliot 1923; *Prose* 2014, 478-479)

In “Gerontion,” Eliot draws principally on Bradley’s neo-idealism, but in *The Waste Land*, he draws principally on the social sciences, including E.B. Tyler’s *Primitive Culture* (1871), a landmark in anthropology and cultural evolution, Frazer’s massive catalogue in comparative religion, *The Golden Bough* (1890, 1906-1915), and Jessie Weston’s study of the Grail legends, *From Ritual to Romance* (1920). In a note to *The Waste Land*, he refers serious readers to this scholarship, mentioning Frazer and Weston by name. His indebtedness is confirmed on the first page, for the title is an allusion to the waste land in Frazer and Weston, and the epigraph features the Sibyl of Cumae, a central character in *The Golden Bough*. But more important than Eliot’s references to the content of the ancient narratives is his adaptation of the method used to re-construct them. The social scientists used fragments of vanished religions and cultures to imagine the whole (by definition, an abstraction) which could then be used as a platform for understanding the fragments with which they had begun. The fragments at issue are what Tyler termed “survivals,” bits and pieces of primitive life and thought that have survived intact into different and alien contexts (Brooker 2018, 63). In their quest for lost originals, scientists hypothesized that these decontextualized fragments were remnants of a single myth. A rough analogy of the process would be using a few random pieces of a jigsaw puzzle to imagine the missing image of which they had been a part, and then using the abstraction to imagine missing pieces, a dialectical process that continuously refines the image of the lost original.

Although Eliot rejected Frazer’s positivism (from magic to religion to science) and disagreed with his interpretations, he felt that the Frazerian method of juxtaposing largely uninterpreted fragments provided a starting point for generating the epistemological position from which to gain a more comprehensive perspective on ancient and contemporary history (Brooker and Bentley 1990, 48-49). As Professor Bentley and I argued in *Reading “The Waste Land,”* one way of passing beyond the moment,



one way of manufacturing a synthetic perspective, a place from which the feeling of seeing from the outside can be juxtaposed with the problem of being trapped on the inside, is by alluding to ancient myths. Alluding without explanation to many myths generates an abstraction, something outside ourselves in both time and space. (Brooker and Bentley 1990, 52)

Eliot's most explicit statement on the "mythical method" is contained in his review of *Ulysses*, the core of which is quoted above. With Joyce's *Ulysses* and Wyndham Lewis's *Tarr* as examples, he maintains that the perspective associated with the narrative method—that is, viewing the world from within the stream of time—is not only limited, but also inadequate for artists in the early twentieth century; on the other hand, the perspective arising from the mythical method enables one to imagine a platform outside the stream. The narrative method, in which events and situations exist as links in a chain, misrepresents the reality of the moment in 1919. Viewed from the inside, this history (any history) is "an immense panorama of futility and anarchy"; viewed from the outside, history assumes a shape and reveals significance, making the "modern world possible for art" (Eliot 2014, 479, 478). To grasp the shape, as argued in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," one must temporarily transcend the moment and experience "the temporal and the timeless together" (Eliot 2014, 106).

## BINARY PERSPECTIVES IN *THE WASTE LAND*

"These fragments I have shored against my ruins." (Eliot 2015, 71)

Tyler's definition of survivals is especially helpful in reading *The Waste Land*, a poem littered with "withered stumps of time," decontextualized fragments in various languages assembled without conjunction or context from diverse civilizations spanning millennia. The epigraph is a first century fragment in Latin, which embeds a pre-historic fragment in Greek, and the final paragraph is a cascade of fragments in Latin, Greek, Italian, French, and Sanskrit, with an English language insertion—"These fragments I have shored against my ruins." Some of the fragments, as suspected by Eliot's earliest readers, are decontextualized fragments of the poet's private life, a suspicion confirmed by the release in 2020 of love letters to his American friend, Emily Hale.<sup>2</sup>

The distinction between survivals and allusions, as I argued in *T.S. Eliot's Dialectical Imagination*, is important in achieving perspective on the "heap of broken images" that constitutes *The Waste Land* (Brooker 2018, 63). Eliot himself refers to this distinction in responding to a reader of *Ash-Wednesday*. "The line beginning

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<sup>2</sup> Eliot's letters to Emily Hale, under seal at Princeton University for fifty years, were opened to the public on 2 January 2020 and are being edited by John Haffenden for publication in 2022. Quotations from these letters in this essay are from my transcription at Princeton in 2020.



*Ash-Wednesday* is a straight borrowing and not an allusive borrowing. That is an important distinction.”<sup>3</sup> “Straight borrowings” or survivals are fragments from the remote or recent past, like a prayer in Sanskrit from the Upanishads or the rubble of Verdun along the River Meuse. Allusions, by contrast, are interpretations of the past emanating from the mind of a contemporary, like the opening allusion to *The Canterbury Tales* or the allusion in part v to Christ on the road to Emmaus. Neither allusions nor survivals alone are capable of generating a binary perspective, but both together, co-existing in the mind of a person who is aware of his own ephemerality, can generate a platform from which the feeling of being trapped on the inside co-exists with the feeling of seeing from the outside.

As an illustration of the distinction between allusions and survivals, consider the Shakespearean frame of “A Game of Chess.” This section of *The Waste Land* begins with an allusion to *Antony and Cleopatra*. “The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne, / Glowed on the marble” (Eliot 2015, 58) echoes Enobarbus’s description of Cleopatra’s ceremonial boat as it moves down river toward her first meeting with Antony: “The barge she sat in, like a burnish’d throne, / Burn’d on the water” (II. ii.1). As a man in contemporary London observes a woman observing herself in a mirror, he is nearly blinded by the reflection in the glass of the flames of a candelabra and the glitter of jewels, a scene that sparks a fleeting thought of the Queen’s barge, burnished by sunlight on water, resembling a throne of gold. “A Game of Chess” ends with a survival from *Hamlet* (IV.v), “Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night,” a verbatim quotation of Ophelia’s farewell to the ladies of the court in Denmark, after which, driven mad by Hamlet’s rebuke, she drowns herself. The allusion to *Antony and Cleopatra* is an interpretation by a post-war Londoner; the survival from *Hamlet* is a poignant farewell by an innocent girl driven mad by a prince. The first is ironic, the second, pathetic; the first, subjective, the last, objective. The voice of the man who alludes to Cleopatra does not take us out of the cluttered boudoir or the local pub. The voice of mad Ophelia, arriving intact from the past, is not only more powerful, but takes us out of the bedroom and the pub and generates the binary perspective, inside and outside of contemporary history, from which we can view all the women in this section of the poem with more objectivity. The note of tragedy in Ophelia’s valediction connects these women with each other, and also with the men who shaped their ends. The models for the women include Vivien Eliot and Emily Hale, whom Eliot identified as the hyacinth girl (Southam 157; Brooker 2022; Eliot 2019).

The most striking example of survivals in Eliot’s poetry are his epigraphs and the avalanche of fragments in the final paragraph of *The Waste Land*. Epigraphs, like titles, are not related to opening lines, but to the poem as a whole. Like the scream of Agamemnon in the epigraph of “Sweeney among the Nightingales,” these fragmentary voices arriving from outside the poet in time and space result in sharp juxtapositions of the temporal and the timeless. In the two epigraphs associated with

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<sup>3</sup> Eliot to H. Warner Allen, 25 May 1960. Forthcoming in Eliot, *Letters*.



*The Waste Land*—one from Conrad, the other from Petronius— the binary perspective is generated by form (the epigraph) and reenforced by content dealing with knowledge and perspective. Eliot's first choice was the passage from *Heart of Darkness* in which Marlow reveals the dying words of the European ivory trader, Mistah Kurtz.

Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision —he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath— “The horror! The horror!” (Conrad 1988, 68; Eliot 1971, 3)

Marlow's interpretation of “The horror!” associates it with a “supreme moment of complete knowledge,” a transcendent moment in which Kurtz, teetering between life and death, has a vision of both at once. This perspective is unavailable to Marlow, who speculates that Kurtz is not only in the moment (he is dying) but also on a platform from which he can re-live his entire life in a flash. “The horror,” Marlow suggests, stems from Kurtz's binary perspective, his sudden vision of the temporal and the timeless together.

Partially in deference to Pound, who did not consider Conrad weighty enough for the poem, Eliot dropped the epigraph from *Heart of Darkness* and substituted one from the *Satyricon*, a first-century fragment by the Roman satirist Petronius. The fragment of the fragment that Eliot uses is from a banquet scene in which drunken guests tell stories to impress other guests. The host, Trimalchio, boasts that he has seen the revered Sibyl of Cumae, the gatekeeper to the underworld who was consulted by Aeneas when he landed in Italy. As a mortal loved by Apollo, she was granted as many years as the grains of sand she could hold in her hand, but she was not granted perpetual youth. The sensational part of Trimalchio's boast is that this semi-divine prophetess had withered to the size of a cricket and was confined in a bottle, unable to escape, unable to die.

“Nam Sibyllam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis vidi  
in ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerent:  
Σίβυλλα τί θέλεις; respondebat illa: ἄπο Θανεῖν θέλω.” (Eliot 2015, 53)

[With my own eyes, I saw the Sibyl at Cumae hanging in a bottle, and when the boys said to her: “Sibyl, what do you want?” she would always respond, “I want to die.”]<sup>4</sup>

This epigraph, like the one from Conrad, deals with knowledge and perspective. But Trimalchio, speaking in Latin some two thousand years ago and quoting a much older character speaking in Greek, is more remote than Kurtz and

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<sup>4</sup> Following D.G. Rossetti's mistaken translation of *ampulla*, critics often discuss the Sibyl as suspended in a cage. But the most startling aspect of Trimalchio's picture is that it presents a seer contained within the closed system of a flask or jar. See Brooker and Bentley 1990, 45.



automatically enables a larger perspective on contemporary history. The Cumaean Sibyl was a seer, and as such, she was not confined to a single perspective in a single moment. Mortals are bound in time and limited to one perspective at a time, which may change from moment to moment, but at any given moment, it remains single. Mortals do not see the world as a whole, but as a continuously shifting array of sights and sounds. Finite beings, as Eliot argues in his dissertation, do not have the luxury of contemplating one consistent world, but rather, “the painful task of unifying (more or less) jarring and incompatible ones” (Eliot 1916, *Prose* 2014, 362; Brooker and Bentley 1990, 46). The Sibyl, by contrast, exists both inside and outside of time and space. In an earlier stage of her existence, she could grasp the entire history of Rome in a single picture, either before or after it happened, but according to Trimalchio, she has now lost her mythic perspective. Confined in a closed system, limited in her ability to know, she has lost her will to live.

The Sibyl of Cumae is the first of several characters with extraordinary perspective in *The Waste Land*—prophets such as Ezekiel, charlatans such as Madame Sosostriis, incarnated divinities such as the post-resurrection Christ, and of special significance, Tiresias, whose centrality is underscored in Eliot’s notes.

Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a “character,” is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. Just as the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias *sees*, in fact, is the substance of the poem. (Eliot 2015, 74)

As Joseph Bentley and I explained in *Reading “The Waste Land,”* the blind Theban prophet functions as an observer (not an actor) in the poem; he is an impotent voyeur with binary perspective. An “old man with wrinkled female breasts,” he is both male and female; “throbbing between two lives,” he exists both inside and outside of history, equally at home with bank clerks in London and with Achilles and Agamemnon in the underworld. Though blind, he can “see” a typist clearing her breakfast dishes in London and he waits with her for “the expected guest” (Eliot 2015, 63). From his position inside history, he experiences in detail what is enacted in this sordid affair; from his perspective outside of history, the characters “melt” into each other, revealing the “substance of the poem” (Brooker and Bentley 1990, 53). Tiresias is also a symbol of the complex relationship between knowledge and power. In *Oedipus Rex*, he knows that the curse on Thebes was caused by the king’s incest, but he can only see and say; he cannot change the course of history.

The most spectacular juxtaposition of allusions and survivals in Eliot’s poetry is found in the last eleven lines of *The Waste Land*.

I sat upon the shore  
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me  
Shall I at least set my lands in order?  
London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down  
*Poi s’ascese nel foco che gli affina*



*Quando fiam uti chelidon* –O swallow swallow  
*Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie*  
 These fragments I have shored against my ruins  
 Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.  
 Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.  
 Shantih shantih shantih (Eliot 2015, 71)

This conclusion contains three allusions. All are in English, all use the first-person pronoun, and all are interpretations of materials related to the controlling myth of the waste land. The image of the Fisher King on the shore is, as Eliot says in his note, an allusion to the connection between the sickness of the king and the aridity of his land in Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*. The second allusion, a question, supplements the reference to the mythic materials with a reference to Isaiah 38, where the prophet tells Hezekiah, a king who is "sick unto death," to set his house in order and prepare to die. The third and final allusion – "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" – is also a reference to the mythic materials and, in addition, to the heap of broken images making up the text of this conclusion and of the poem as a whole.

Mixed in with these allusions are seven survivals or, as Eliot refers to them, "straight borrowings." All of these are uninterpreted and thus impersonal fragments, beginning with a childhood nursery rhyme (with mythic roots) and concluding with the formal ending of an Upanishad. The survivals are all in their original languages – Italian, Latin, English, French, and Sanskrit. One of the fragments, the reference to the Provençal poet Arnaut Daniel, deals directly with knowledge and binary perspective. Dante encounters him in the seventh circle of Purgatory, where he now has perspective on his life on earth and a vision of his life in Paradise, and so he joyfully plunges into the refining fire. The survival that is most important for binary perspective, however, is "Shantih shantih shantih," repeated three times as in the conclusion to *The Waste Land*, which takes us out of western culture altogether, generating a platform from which we can imagine the temporal and the timeless together, enabling us to imagine a timeless realm from which to view both contemporary history and the fragments in Eliot's poem.

## CONCLUSION

Now and then, ... I get flashes of perception of a kind of 'pattern' in life, in my life, which are like mystical moments; flashes which... while they last, reconcile one to all the mystery of... suffering in the past. (Eliot to Emily Hale. 31 December 1931)<sup>5</sup>

By the late 1920s, the high modernist moment, brilliantly caught in Valéry's "La crise de l'esprit" and Eliot's *The Waste Land*, had spent itself. Eliot remained

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<sup>5</sup> Eliot's letters to Emily Hale are scheduled for publication by Faber and Faber in 2022.

preoccupied with time and history and with the tension between entrapment in time and possibilities for transcending it. But his focus had changed. Instead of a vertical image of a higher platform from which one has greater perspective, he presents a horizontal image of an intersection, a boundary where time and the timeless meet. The turning point was his acceptance of the Incarnation, the central idea of which is that the Logos (the Word, timeless) became flesh (entered history) and dwelt among us (John 1:1). In June 1927, Eliot turned his back on his *papier-mâché* culture, was baptized into the Christian Church, and began edging toward the understanding of time and perspective realized in *Four Quartets*. *Burnt Norton* inaugurates a series of philosophical meditations on being in time, meditations indebted to Eliot's readings in mysticism, his understanding of the Incarnation, and his own spiritual exercises. The three war-time Quartets – *East Coker*, *The Dry Salvages*, and *Little Gidding* – extend and deepen the reflections in *Burnt Norton* by focusing, as in *Little Gidding*, on history as a “pattern of timeless moments,” on the intersection of time and the timeless moment that is available on winter afternoons, here and now, in England and nowhere.

Reviews sent to the author: 31/07/2022

Revised paper accepted for publication: 01/09/2022



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