

**Communication Tongued with Fire
Personal Reflections on the Eternity-Vision
of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets***

John Wren-Lewis

We know a poet because he makes us poets.

S.T. Coleridge

The human soul, in intense emotion, strives to express itself in verse

T.S. Eliot

All poets are artists in using language; a great poet creates new language, new combinations of words (even sometimes actual new words, as in the case of Shakespeare) which enable experiences to be expressed as never before, and hence to be brought to new levels of awareness for the individual reader and for the whole community. From that standpoint, T.S. Eliot has a good claim to be the major poet of our century. Even before the musical *Cats* made his name literally a household word all around the globe, many phrases that he invented were incorporated into common parlance, often without their origin being known to many who use them – “measuring out life in coffee spoons,” for instance; experiencing “fear in a handful of dust,” the world ending, “not with a bang, but a whimper,” or “human kind cannot bear very much reality.”

Such expressions have been particularly important in articulating the *spiritual* concerns of our time, especially concerns about death and dying, right across the spectrum from organised religion to the so-called, “Human Potential Movement”, trans-personal psychology and the farthest-out New Age Groups. In fact, if today’s spiritual seekers had a motto, it would surely have to be:

We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

I have often heard those lines, or paraphrases of them, quoted anonymously as if they came from some ancient scripture; in fact, they come from the final passage of Eliot’s poetic *magnum opus*, the cycle called *Four Quartets*, first published in complete form over half a century ago. He encapsulated in those four lines an ancient legend of a long-lost sailor finally drifting to land on what he thinks to be some remote shore, only to discover that it is his home, a theme quoted again and again by Eliot’s slightly older contemporary, the prolific novelist, essayist, critic, biographer and popular philosopher, G.K. Chesterton, who in 1912 published a whole novel, *Manalive*, based on the idea that such a traveller would, for the first time, fully appreciate the place he came from.

I knew Eliot in the 1950s, when he was the most senior and I the most junior council-member of a teaching centre called St. Anne’s House in London’s Soho, which also celebrated its half-centenary not long ago. I was amused to read recently that an American critic has likened Eliot’s work in the *Quartets* to taking over a bombed-out area in the materialistic jungle of twentieth-century Western culture in order to establish an arena for spiritual re-appraisal – for that was what he and a group of others did quite literally in 1943, when the *Quartets* could not yet be published in book form in England (but only in Eliot’s native America) because of wartime paper shortage. Hitler’s bombs took out the ancient Anglican church of St. Anne, Soho, but left the offices and clergy-house standing, and the formidable detective-novelist-turned-

religious-playwright, Dorothy L. Sayers, sought Eliot's help in persuading the Bishop of London to open the building as a "centre for Christian discourse" where lectures could be given. At that time I was a science student at London University, and all unbeknown to each other, Eliot and I were fire-wardens in the same "disfigured streets" that he described so vividly in the final *Quartet*; I came to St. Anne's only after the War, when I was asked to lecture there on science and religion, and by then Eliot was already a Nobel Laureate, having been awarded the Literature Prize in 1948.

I thought there was something vaguely familiar about the tall, thin, distinguished-looking elderly man who slipped into the back row just as I began lecturing and slipped out again equally unobtrusively as soon as I stopped, every week for about two months. I realised his identity only when a letter arrived from Eliot, in his capacity as a Director of the publishing company Faber and Faber, asking if I would like to do a book on the subject. I was, of course, over the moon; but I was also quite astonished, not out of modesty, but because I had been arguing fiercely against the conservative Christian orthodoxy of Chesterton (who died before the War), of Sayers, of Eliot and of the other famous council-member at St. Anne's, C. S. Lewis. I had come from a home where God was the great Fuhrer in the sky who demanded that we all knuckle under to our workers' duties in poverty without protest and who would strike us down if we did not; and although I strongly believed that science did not disprove the idea of God, I saw traditional Christianity as an even worse enemy of the spirit than the atheism or agnosticism of my scientific colleagues. That letter from Eliot was the first hint of what I came to realise only much later, that at heart all of them were far less narrow-minded in their orthodoxy than they are usually given credit for, even by some of their greatest admirers.

I would now rank Chesterton, Eliot and Lewis all as early "Sages of Aquarius", forerunners of the great upsurge of free spiritual enquiry that began in the 1960s under the banner of the Age of Aquarius.

All three, for instance, were open to the fact of spiritual truth in non-Christian religions, and Lewis wrote a book about it. All three saw it as part of their work to re-awaken awareness and love of the great worldwide pre-Christian mythic traditions, as Joseph Campbell and Jean Houston have been doing in the heyday of the Aquarian movement; Lewis ranged from science fiction to children's stories (the famous *Narnia* books) for this purpose, and Eliot's poetry is full of classical mythic overtones even when dealing with the most modern themes – for example, *Four Quartets* is a cycle of four long poems (called quartets because four voices can be heard in each) constructed around themes of the four ancient mythic elements, air, earth, water and fire.

All three writers were also very aware, in marked contrast to most orthodox Christianity in their day and ours, that spirituality involves awakening awareness of the natural environment – not sentimental or superstitious *beliefs* about the goodness of nature prior to humanity, but actual *consciousness of place*. Chesterton wrote several novels trying to convey that even suburbs have such spirit for those with eyes to see, and one of his essays tells how an artist's impression of the earth as a globe in space, which he found in a scientific encyclopedia for children, moved him to exactly the kind of spiritual-environmental vision of Planet Earth that in our own day has come to astronauts. And Eliot, whose most famous early poem used the metaphor of *The Waste Land* to express materialism's dehumanisation of life, went on to express his spiritual vision in the *Quartets* by naming each of the poems after a specific place that had been spiritually important to him. He used his poetic art to explore what it was like to know those places with spiritual consciousness.

The real subject of the poems, however, is consciousness itself rather than the places, and that is what makes Eliot our great poet of the spirit. For spirit is consciousness – not your consciousness or mine or anyone's, but consciousness-as-such, the dimension of *Isness* or of Conscious Being, whose play of individualised *doing* is the entire dance of events in place and time. Eliot advances this theme in

the first *Quartet*, the poem of air, which was actually written nearly a decade before the others and named *Burnt Norton*, after a country house burned down by its owner in the eighteenth century in the beautiful English Cotswolds, noted for splendid gardens. It is about time, and about the memories that always haunt such gardens for the discerning eye, like the illusion of children' s laughter in the rustling of dry leaves in a sunlit drained pool – children who are now long dead:

Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty...

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

Cannot bear very much reality.

And yet there is that other dimension altogether in the very fact of consciousness itself:

To be conscious is not to be in time.

This is the meaning of eternity – not everlasting time (*“the waste sad time, stretching before and after”*), but the all-embracing present-ness of Conscious Being or Spirit, which continually creates time and space as the matter of its manifestation-in-doing:

Except for the point, the still point,

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

That is not a metaphysical belief; it is a plain fact of direct experience *whenever there is full consciousness of the actual process of experiencing*, that is, consciousness of consciousness itself, of its being, as well as of the things that the conscious person *does*:

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

And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.

The tragedy of the ordinary human condition, which in one way or another is the main subject of nearly all Eliot' s poetry, and the central theme of the *Quartets*, is that this dimension of consciousness is absent from most of life, because the whole structure of human living concentrates our individualised attention totally on the temporal business of *doing* (which includes thinking, savouring, emoting, judging and willing, as well as physical action), to the exclusion of actual experiencing, the non-temporal essence of consciousness:

Time past and time future

Allow but a little consciousness.

In that sense, all human cultures of which we have record have been materialistic in practice, long before materialism emerged in explicit philosophies in recent centuries, when sceptics began to challenge the lip-service that was given to the *idea* of spirit in religious cultures. And this practical materialism – the concentration of attention on the matter rather than on the spirit of living, on doing

rather than on being, on time rather than on eternity – is tragic because it robs life of its only real satisfaction. Except for a few fairly rare folk commonly known as mystics, real satisfaction comes only in occasional flashes:

*The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,
The moment in the draughty church at smokefall.*

But temporal satisfactions, as the Buddha uncompromisingly insisted, must necessarily end in suffering because of their transcendence and shallowness, and the practical materialism of human culture only makes matters infinitely worse by encouraging the idea that getting something better means *doing* something more, or something different. Yet what else is there?

Eliot had been a Buddhist in his younger days – there are many Buddhist ideas in *The Waste Land*, even a quotation from Gautama's famous "Fire Sermon" – and he seems to have carried most of the pessimism sometimes associated (I now think wrongly associated) with Buddhism into the Anglican Christianity which he embraced in his mature years. His own life perhaps gave him some reason for this, as was recently exposed in the movie *Tom and Viv*, showing how his difficult character might have been held responsible (not least by his own puritan conscience) for his first wife's breakdown into madness. Also, he could see more clearly than many in the 1930s how war was almost certain to engulf Europe again, with only a weary commercial materialism in the democracies to withstand the monstrous totalitarianism of Nazism and Stalinism – a situation where, in the words of Yeats whom Eliot greatly admired, "the best lack all conviction, and the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity." Eliot's conclusion in "Burnt Norton" was that humanity's tragic and dangerous alienation from the eternity/dimension of spirit must be endemic in the very nature of fleshly existence: "the enchainment of past and future/ Woven in the weakness of the changing body."

It was on this issue most of all that the youthful and still very naive John Wren-Lewis chose to challenge the now aging Nobel Laureate, and I was actually encouraged to do so by his own words in the second *Quartet*, the poem of earth (written after War had come), entitled *East Coker* after the village in Somerset where Eliot's ancestors had lived until Andrew Eliot emigrated to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1667. The poem retains Eliot's deep pessimism about the world, but it also encourages the young not to be too respectful of their elders:

*Had they deceived us,
Or deceived themselves, the quiet voiced elders,
Bequeathing us merely a receipt for deceit?
The serenity only a deliberate hebetude,
The wisdom only the knowledge of dead secrets
Useless in the darkness.
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.*

The point I wanted to dispute back then was summed up in marvellous poetry in the third *Quartet*, the poem of water named after a group of rocks off the New England coast in America, *The Dry Salvages* (pronounced "Salwages"):

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

I was then, as now, immensely moved by the poetry – in fact, I became that verbal music while it lasted – yet I hated what it was saying, for its conclusion seemed suspiciously like a highbrow version of the pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die religion of my childhood, against which I had rebelled into science. Faced with the choice of giving up physical existence as hopeless or of dismissing those special moments as mere passing fancies, I took the latter course, and rejected all mysticism as neurotic delusion, choosing instead a very practical Christian humanism aimed at making the world better at providing the "fruition, fulfilment, security or affection" which Eliot came close to despising.

I felt myself thoroughly vindicated in this choice when in 1949 Eliot returned to his earlier role as playwright with *The Cocktail Party*, in which the heroine, whose mystical longing for those special moments forces her to break away from human relationships in order to become a nun, finds her fulfilment only in death, martyred by savages. ("They crucified her near an anthill"). Yet when I met Eliot later in the 1950's, I found none of the harshness to ordinary life that his verse seemed to show so clearly; and what was more, his next two plays were altogether gentler, softer, more accepting of the possibility that life might after all be good. The last play in particular, *The Elder Statesman*, depicts a Grand Old Man being unmasked publicly for dishonesties and meannesses in his youth, but eventually coming to forgive himself. He blesses his daughter for her forthcoming marriage with no hint that it is doomed to be a mediocre exercise in vanity, as marriage was portrayed in *The Cocktail Party*, or end in just "dung and death," as do the rustic marriages of *East Coker* – and then he himself dies peacefully under a beech tree, with no hint of the "primitive terror" of *The Dry Salvages*. I could not help seeing Eliot himself in that character, for by then he had married his secretary and apparently found the domestic felicity that he had formerly dismissed as impossible, an act which must have taken no mean act of self-forgiveness for those conscience-tormenting earlier years. At the time, I could only attribute this to the mellowing of age, but I now think that there may have been a more profound explanation.

Back then, I paid little attention to the fact that he had had a heart attack from which he nearly died in 1951, just before I had that letter from him; I am not sure that I even knew about it, since the information came as a complete surprise when I recently read Stephen Spender's thoughtful book *Eliot* in the Fontana Modern Masters series. Today, however, I know from the researches of Dr. Kenneth Ring in America, of Dr. Cherie Sutherland here, and of many others around the world, as well as from my own personal experience, that coming close to death can, for many people, bring a major mystical opening of

consciousness that goes altogether beyond those “hints followed by guesses” which the Eliot of the *Quartets* believed were the best that most of us could expect in this life. It also often brings a profound self-forgiveness. When I was trying to write an account in 1985 of my own “Near-Death Experience” of two years before, I actually found a phrase from *East Coker*, running through my head as the perfect description of it: “I will say to my soul, Be still, and let the dark come upon you,/ Which shall be the darkness of God.”

These words were, I knew, a reference to the mystical writings of St. John of the Cross, but until my near-death experience, I had taken them to mean simply the prayerful acceptance of life’s worst derelictions, perhaps including death itself. In the near-death experience, however, I encountered a Living Dark which was, quite simply, “eternity in love with the productions of time,” an all-embracing love for everything at the very ground of consciousness as such, the “everything” including John Wren-Lewis with all his weaknesses and nastinesses, past and present. And it has stayed with me day and night ever since, thereby proving beyond any doubt that “enchainment” of consciousness to past and future is *not*, definitely not, “woven in the weakness of the changing body.” Whatever *is* responsible for the common eternity-blindness of the ordinary human condition, it can be cured this side of the grave for anyone, as I am sure both the Buddha and Jesus knew - and my suspicion now is that Eliot discovered at least something of this in his heart attack. I think that he came back knowing that all those “guesses” at mystical truth, for which he had struggled to find the right words drawing on the “hints” of special moments and the works of the great mystics, were actually the basic properties of his own everyday consciousness in ordinary life:

*The inner freedom from the practical desire,
The release from action and suffering, release from the inner
And outer compulsion, yet surrounded
By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving.*

This experience is a consciousness which abolishes fear of death, not so much because death becomes a passing to the eternal home, but because the eternal home is, to pick a phrase from *East Coker* out of context, “where one starts from” at every instant in the adventure of living, in this world or in any other. The rest of my life-adventure in this world is now dedicated to investigating possible other ways of breaking the enchainment of consciousness to past and future without dicing with death; or, to coin a phrase, “How to Succeed into Eternity without Nearly Dying.” I think this is humanity’s great task for the coming millennium now that near-death experiences have shown us the possibility, and in that task I am sure that there is an enormous amount to be learned from the guesses of Thomas Stearns Eliot and from his marvellous “raids on the inarticulate” in an effort to express them.

And if I am right about his heart attack in 1951, then his actual death in 1965 will have given a new twist of meaning to the lines which appear on his memorial in Westminster Abbey, taken from the last *Quartet*, the poem of fire called *Little Gidding* after the Huntingdonshire village that he had chosen for special prayers:

*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.*

John Wren-Lewis

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