Trying Again

T.S. Eliot and the Ethics of Imperfection

Petra Ellerby
Western Washington University
T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* is a book obsessed by language, a set of poems preoccupied with its own semantic substrate. These dense, difficult, and deeply allusive meditations are marked by an absorption with words, an awareness of their limits, and an emphasis on the acceptance or endurance of uncomfortable ineffability. Within the volume's conceptual world, spiritual frustrations and compositional failures are presented as mirrored objects, intellectual images which can be understood as mutual metaphors, metonymies, or even analogues. Writing and worship are never entirely interchangeable, but their parallel attributes (and allied purposes) act together to emphasize an ethical system centered on the search for unassuming perseverance. Ground-level connections between human language and its divine subjects develop into a comprehensive theory of temporal effort:† committed work without presumption, action in the absence of coveted ends.‡

It is this internal mechanism that forms the central focus of the present paper, but Eliot-oriented inquiries are not the full measure of my exegetical matter. Associations between linguistic shortcomings and religious frustrations do merit sustained attention, and the manner in which *Four Quartets* constructs its ethical 'escape' certainly requires some dedicated thought. Nevertheless, this fine-grained analysis can be productively complemented via careful interaction with related texts. Eliot's marriage between word and worship is echoed in the writings of far-flung authors,§ complicated and enriched by ideas explored within such works as Mark Salzman's *Lying Awake*, Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*, and Primo Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved*. In accordance with *Four Quartets*' characteristic allusivity, insights drawn from these secondary materials will be interspersed or interleaved throughout each of this essay's sequential sections.¶ It is only fitting that more words and more works be introduced to provide another perspective on Eliot's profoundly *lettered* poem.

1. Published in 1943, *Four Quartets* forms the foundation of its author's final literary turn. At the end of an intense, celebrated, but unproductive career, Eliot's attention shifted toward a timely subject: time, that is, and its compositional counterpart. From the collection's very first lines, the paradoxical difficulties involved in any attempt to convey a specific sensation—yet alone summarize an entire literary life—are presented as core concerns, historic challenges with which Eliot has not yet reconciled. "Time present and time past," he writes, "Are both present in time future, / And time future contained in time past." But if all time "is eternally present [as in

† That is, earthly (as vs. divine) toil.
‡ In another formulation: action *without attachment* to coveted ends.
§ Authors, furthermore, who are associated with diverse spiritual, cultural, and historical systems...
¶ These intertextual references will be most thoroughly treated in section 3 below.
memory, perhaps?] / All time is unredeemable."⁵ Unredeemable indeed, and correspondingly incommunicable.

The philosophical knot in which *Four Quartets* is bound has much to do with both personal and linguistic failure, the sense that one has fallen short of a long-held goal. On the reader's part, this authorial frustration is paired with an interpretive confusion engendered by Eliot's stubborn refusal to connect his poem's disparate topical dots.⁶ The author fumbles for personal closure just as his audience fumbles for present-tense comprehension, and each party's quest—to communicate (Eliot) or to understand (Eliot's readers)—locates words at its core, upholding language as both objective and obstacle. Roadblocks in communication or comprehension are apparent (and addressed) throughout the poem, and Eliot continually laments the duplicity of language—an unreliability which becomes ever more closely tied with spiritual challenges and theological shortfalls. "Words strain," he writes: they

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Crack} \text{ and sometimes break, under the burden,} \\
\text{Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,} \\
\text{Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,} \\
\text{Will not stay still. Shrieking voices} \\
\text{Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering,} \\
\text{Always assail them.⁷}
\end{align*}
\]

*Four Quartets* includes multiple self-referential 'draft' attempts, half-polished passages which are critiqued or censored by a subsequent stanza. In the second section of *East Coker*, Eliot follows a span of traditional rhymed verse with a sizeable chunk of in-text evaluation. "That was a way of putting it," he comments: "not very satisfactory: / A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion, / Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings."⁸ The written word lies at the core of this condemnation, but language itself could be seen as inherently suspect under section II's strict rubric. On the very same page as his original self-admonition, Eliot voices incredulity at the prospect of useful advice, the beneficial transmission of information between human generations. "Had they deceived us / Or deceived themselves, the quiet-voiced elders, / Bequeathing us merely a receipt for deceit"⁹ Is speech (or writing) the corrupting medium through which imperfect teachings must be conveyed? For that matter: is communication itself a foregone conclusion? Is all wisdom "only the knowledge of dead secrets"? Is there, "[a]t best, only a limited value / in knowledge [itself]?"¹⁰

---

⁶ Which are themselves almost invariably obscure.
⁸ Ibid., pp. 25-6.
⁹ Ibid., 26.
¹⁰ Ibid., 26.
$FQ$'s internal questions induce a host of corresponding queries. Is Eliot's uncertainty an intellectual conceit, or is the poem within which it is housed also a thicket that is not to be tamed? Is the work entirely opaque, and are its concerns (conceptual, abstract, difficult-to-fathom) always or only incomprehensible, unreachable, unredeemable? Is the as-yet undefined object of *Four Quartets* without some semblance of sense, bereft of a more tangible, immediate, or easily-analogized goal? Eliot's tone is not without variation, and the poem itself provides some beguiling—if also befuddling—exegetical support. There are always "hints and guesses, / Hints followed by guesses," and *FQ*′s central stanzas are accompanied by a constellation of friendly, almost spritely interpretive aids.$^{11}$ "Other echoes," we are always told, "Inhabit the garden."$^{12}$ "Shall we follow?" asks *Burnt Norton*′s narrator, encouraging its audience with the injunction to "find them, find them."$^{13}$

$^{11}$ Ibid., 45.
$^{12}$ Ibid., 13.
$^{13}$ Ibid., 13.
2.

*FQ* houses many paths towards understanding,\(^{14}\) and Eliot's kindly affirmations are also accompanied by a more substantive philosophical core. *Burnt Norton* 's initial engagement with language that 'cracks,' 'strains,' and 'breaks' is almost immediately accompanied by a more hopeful turn: a deep breath, an emphasis on the utility of *effort* in enabling continued engagement. Traitorous phrases might well suffer from an overabundance of kinetic energy (squirming, as Eliot writes, out of an author's grasp), but their remedy is also to be found in the practice of continuous perseverance. The key to the equation is trial and error, and "[t]he detail of the pattern is movement."\(^{15}\) It is not unexpected that *Four Quartets* ' literary salvation is outlined as a process of understanding that is deeply intertwined with the project of writing.

From this new and slightly more promising vantage, it is possible to pose the critical question once again. Is our effort untenable? Are humans bound to failure—to fail in their attempts to communicate just as they are destined to fall short of meaningful understanding? Are we doomed to engage in ever-feeble assays at apprehending "worn-out" words written in impenetrable or "periphrastic" fashions? Are we seeking "[s]omething that is probably quite ineffable"?\(^{16}\)

Eliot's engagement with guesses and games indicates that there is a positive message encoded somewhere within the poem, and *Burnt Norton* 's emphasis on movement begins to hint at a technique (or path, or route) by which *FQ* 's framework might be more clearly understood. A recognition of uncertainty and indeterminacy is apparent throughout, but a corresponding insistence on the ability to push forward despite (or in the face of) 'unreachability' is almost equally central. "For most of us," Eliot writes, finality is "the aim / Never here to be realized: / We who are only defeated / Because we have *gone on trying.*"\(^{17}\) The sentence's trajectory proceeds from a recognition of defeat to a *redefinition* of failure, and a new goal arises to grace *FQ* 's narrative throne. Within this stanza, finite achievements are deposed in favor of a process-oriented philosophy.

This is, importantly, a *literary* undertaking, a project of verbal proportions.\(^{18}\) Words are understood as an influential tool, but a tool not without caveats. Overconfident wordsmithing is barred from success in the same manner that spiritual seeking is doomed to defeat if it becomes too invested in the presumptuous attainment of impossible ends. One must recognize the insuperable nature of fallibility and incommensurability in order to communicate, in order to

---

\(^{14}\) Or at least acceptance...

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 19.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 39.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 45; emphasis mine.

\(^{18}\) For the raw power of human language, see ibid., 53. An object is labeled as "unidentifiable," but "the words" used by Eliot's narrator are said to have "sufficed / To compel the recognition they preceded."
"purify the dialect of the tribe."¹⁹ We, Eliot's readers, are not equipped to inquire: where is the end? the goal? the reward? But FQ's creator may ask such questions, provided that his queries are properly rhetorical, that they lead toward an understanding that there is nothing to lead toward—or, at least, to reach.

"Where is the end of them?" Eliot asks at the beginning of *The Dry Salvages*. Where is the end of them, the fishermen sailing

> Into the wind's tail, where the fog cowers?
> We cannot think of a time that is oceanless
> Or of an ocean not littered with wastage
> Or of a future that is not liable
> Like the past, to have no destination.

Instead, "[w]e have to think of them [—and ourselves—] as forever bailing,

> Setting and hauling, while the North East lowers
> Over shallow banks unchanging and erosionless
> Or drawing their money, drying sails at dockage;
> Not as making a trip that will be unpayable
> For a haul that will not bear examination."²⁰

The crux of this process is waiting and trying, setting and hauling, endeavor without end.²¹

Linguistic communication requires continuous reevaluation, unyielding input absent immediate reward. But there is also a more metaphysical counterpart to this textual project, an addition which is just as central to Eliot's poem as it is to our interpretive understanding. One of FQ's most explicit denunciations of desire-focused action is expressed via the vocabulary of spiritual patience and religious faith, a fact which adds extra emphasis to the poem's compound processual core. "I said to my soul," Eliot writes in the third section of *East Coker*, "be still, and wait without hope

> For hope would be hope for the wrong thing [i.e., temporal certainty/apotheosis/revelation?]; wait without
> love
> for love would be love of the wrong thing; yet there is faith
> But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.

---

¹⁹ As Little Gidding opines, "last year's words belong to last year's language / And next year's words await another voice." (Ibid., 54.)
²⁰ Ibid., 38.
²¹ I adore the phrase "forever bailing" as a metaphor for modern life.
Or, as we might add, the trying.²² It is increasingly clear that *Four Quartets*' literary project includes ethical, emotional, and especially spiritual dimensions, although the correlation between these two ideas—which are both outlined in parallel terms—cannot yet be confirmed as causation. From a vantage enriched by *East Coker*’s faith/love passage, we can provisionally consider Eliot’s writing/seeking/spirituality metonymy (or 'bundle') to be an interpretive aid, a more concrete twin to the temporal/spiritual/philosophical abstractions that form *FQ*’s disorienting dénouement. But the poem itself connects these ideas: in Eliot's eternal quest to better communicate an ineffable truth, speech and spirituality become increasingly intertwined. *Four Quartets* is always seeking a next and better way to illuminate or express its conceptual content, and the volume's linguistic substrate is so central to this project that writing and worship, by beginning of *Dry Salvages*, cannot be productively disambiguated.²³

Nor is language only a tool of convenience, a de facto focus imposed by the poet's chosen medium. Eliot's treatment of words and their limits is not merely a 'guide' to the volume's other half, a disconnected gloss of a different, separate, and more critical (religious) concern. Indeed, *FQ*’s world seems to regard language not only as an analogy for theistic ethics but as an expression, manifestation, or branch of divinity itself.

This trajectory from the personal to the poetic to the spiritual or philosophical is beautifully illustrated in one of *East Coker*’s last passages, detailed in words more effective than their owner (I suspect) could have expected. Career-related musings are joined by an awareness of greater contexts,²⁴ and the passage's beating heart, a confessional discussion of compositional shortcomings, transforms into a spiritual recognition of unseeking effort. "[H]ere I am," Eliot declares: here I am, and I have failed.

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years—
Twenty years largely wasted, the years of l'entre deux guerres
Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion. And what there is to
   conquer
By strength and submission, has already been discovered
Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot

²² Ibid., 28.
²³ Fully disambiguated, that is.
²⁴ Both spiritual and temporal; cf. "l'entre deux guerres," the time between the wars...
Once again, it is words and their infirmity which both necessitate and illustrate a spiritual status, an accepting state of humble work.

Towards the middle of The Dry Salvages, Eliot's Anglican faith is complemented by a matching emphasis on egoless exertion, a focus which is—nevertheless—formulated in unfamiliar terms. This departure from 'tradition' (if FQ can be said to have a single 'tradition,' allusive as it is) contains one of the volume's most explicit invocations of undesiring action, and serves to cement the wider spiritual nature of East Coker's initially literary concept. Referring to the Bhagavad Gita, Eliot ponders if "that is what Krishna meant

Among other things—or one way of putting the same thing:
That the future is a faded song, a Royal Rose or a lavender spray
Of wistful regret for those who are not yet here to regret,
Pressed between yellow leaves of a book that has never been opened.
And the way up is the way down, the way forward is the way back.  

In its original, uncontextualized state, there is much to question about 'Krishna's' insight. But the enigmatic Herakleitan syntax of this obscure passage is almost immediately joined by a more recognizable injunction. "[D]o not think of the fruit of action," Krishna (via Eliot) continues. Instead, "[f]are forward [...], for [faring] is your real destination." Continuous effort, present effort is an individual's proper goal; the future is a faded song to which humans are not privy. If an evanescent and undesiring moment forms the core of all things, what issue is there if the way up is the way down or the way forward is the way back? Where are we going, we who treat

---

25 Ibid., 30-1; cf Machiavelli Niccolò, Discourses on Livy, trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 152: "[I]t is the duty of a good man to teach others the good you yourself were unable to accomplish due to the malignity of the times or to fortune, so that among the many people capable of such actions, some of those more favored by heaven may [continue the task]."

26 Ibid., 40-1.

27 Cf. Four Quartets' epigraph: "ὁδὸς ἐνα λόγοι μία καὶ ἔσοντη," or "The way upward and the way downward is one and the same." From Die Fragmenten der Vorsokratiker I. p. 89 Fr. 60.

28 Ibid., 42.
going as its own end? We have to think of them as forever bailing, setting and hauling, coming and going...

There is no linear path towards unimpeachable truth or unequivocal success, but there are paths (or 'ways') nevertheless. While *FQ*’s readers cannot search for certainty or satisfaction, they are empowered and encouraged to forge ahead with the tools they have. Shoddy tools they may be, but adequate they are, as long as we follow Eliot’s— and Krishna’s— advice and act (well) for acting (well)’s sake.
Continuous effort as a self-contained goal is not limited to Eliot's poem, nor are its tenets at home only in mid-century protestant theology. Mark Salzman's influential monastery novel *Lying Awake* provides a vision of spiritual apotheosis that posits *doing* as a remedy for *unknowing* or *unreaching*, and Herman Hesse's seminal *Siddhartha* illustrates a compelling set of parallel insights. *Lying Awake* is notable for its marriage of words and worship, a pairing that outlines yet more problems with the trustworthiness of overconfident composition. (Within this novel's plot, words are understood as a potential path towards self-deception, a means to communicate illusive sublimity, and a self-centered distraction from a selfless God.)

But for Salzman, as for Eliot, language's value resides in its *use*, and *Lying Awake* 's literary medium produces ample ammunition which is—as might be expected—employed to evangelize for the prioritization of process over product. In one of its most pellucid passages, *Lying Awake* foregrounds the sort of dignifying physical portraiture that *FQ* advocates,²⁹ outlining the visible grace that attends one manifestation of "pattern [and] movement."³⁰ In describing a nun's particular way of being in the world, Salzman writes:

> Time seemed at Sister Priscilla's disposition. While [others] experienced time as the measurement of waiting [...] for Sister Priscilla, all the waiting seemed to be over. The main event was under way; time was a measurement of action.

> And all her actions were beautiful. She turned even the most ordinary tasks, like pulling maps down or emptying the pencil sharpener, into sacraments.³¹

Doing and trying, rather than waiting, seeking, or expecting, form the core of this striking image. Sister Priscilla is the perfect embodiment of an individual who has given up the attainment of perfection in favor of a continual—and thus unhurried, hence beautiful—approach. (Not less of note is that this graceful choice is associated with a specific *FQ*-inflected spirituality.) In an echo of Eliot's Herakleitan motif,³² Salzman also pairs Priscilla's presentation with a similar image of divinity itself, claiming that "God, who is infinite, cannot become present because he can never be absent."³³ We cannot attain because we are constantly seeking; God cannot arrive because he is eternally here. Constant motion without a finite end negates any issue with the 'way up'

---

²⁹ Via its own investment in poetic imagery, that is.
³⁰ I.e., a present-tense practice associated with Eliot's action-oriented ethics. For the quote, see ibid., 19.
³² The way up/the way down; ends as beginnings, and vice versa.
equaling the 'way down', just as any logical or theological problems associated with a deity's absence are solved by the understanding that omnipresence also entails simple presence.

Salzmann's prioritization of mundane divinity is a productive mirror for Four Quartets' spiritual process theology, but Lying Awake as a whole does not spare special thought for literature and its associated issues. Siddhartha, on the other hand, directly engages a set of compositional woes, lamenting that "[w]ords do not express thoughts very well. They always become a little different immediately as they are expressed, a little distorted, a little foolish." And why are words so slippery? Because they are tied with striving or trying of a teleological sort.

Hesse's eponymous protagonist engages in an overzealous quest for incontrovertible certainty, eschewing even the Buddha's teachings on account of their linguistic inadequacy. ("To nobody," he claims, "can you [the Buddha] communicate in words [...] what happened to you in the hour of your enlightenment.") But an acceptance of ineffability is not out of the picture, and Siddhartha's high-strung hero is able to recognize one important thing about the Buddha's bearing. Holy and humble, this Illustrious One "wore his gown and walked along exactly like the other monks, but his face and his step, his peaceful downward glance, his peaceful downward-hanging hand, and every finger of his hand spoke of peace, spoke of completeness, sought nothing, imitated nothing, reflected a continuous quiet." As with Eliot and Salzmann, spiritual (and communicative) struggles can be understood as a frustration, a dead end, or as a path towards nirvana—accepting, of course, the necessity of endless effort. By the end of the book, Siddhartha has learned "how to listen [...] with a still heart, [...] without passions, without desire, without judgment."

Modern novels of spirit and mind provide one productive point of comparison for FQ's contents, but ultimate practical-historical test of concept for Eliot's effort-oriented ethics can be found in the pages of Primo Levi's The Drowned and the Saved. WWII, with its camps and its blitzes and its 'incommunicable' slaughters, acts as a reality check on stuffy philosophies, a force against which self-deception cannot stand. Indeed, the gaping horrors of 1933-45 (and before, and after) would seem to render Krishna's insight untenable or unrealistic—who could prioritize actions over ends when their life is on the line?—but Levi's conclusion is not so simple. Instead of emphasizing the exculpatory nature of coercive contexts or the protective qualities of party lines,

---

34 —they are both ways, after all, and the way its own goal—
35 Which is not, of course, to imply that strict logical thought is ever upheld as FQ's (or Lying Awake's) ideal interpretive tool.
37 I.e., ends-oriented... and certainly not humble.
38 Ibid., 34; emphasis mine.
39 Hesse, Siddhartha, 27; emphasis mine.
40 Ibid., 106.
The Drowned and the Saved argues for a continuous engagement with moral questions and an insistence on independent thought. While it does not presume to provide a universal prophylactic against authoritarian atrocities, the book does prescribe an Arendtian practice of critical inquiry.

Levi does not deny the fragile and ephemeral nature of communication when faced with immeasurable abuse, although his conclusions are by no means cheerful. The human condition, he writes, is not characterized either by a fundamental 'incommunicability' or an essential evil: instead, such qualities can be traced specifically (in this context) to the Nazi regime, a regime which chose to rob its victims both of spiritual meaning and ethical agency. By masterminding a compound moral-intellectual void that could only be described in imperfect analogic terms, National Socialism constructed an entity which could not—it hoped—be properly comprehended or condemned. Any attempt to portray these "holes of hell" is bound to fall short of the full and horrific reality of its unvarnished object, but The Drowned and the Saved argues that this fact gives us no morally valid excuse not to try. Levi's understanding of words and their limits (as well as the extreme edges of spirituality) is grim indeed, but it is by no means hopeless—and it is in this refusal to let the Lagers win that the precept to persist, to 'try again,' becomes most salient. Only through language, after all, have we been given rare and precious knowledge about the rebellion and resistance that did occur, the resistance which allowed Hannah Arendt to write that

The holes of oblivion [i.e., examples of entirely incommunicable or forgotten horror] do not exist. Nothing human is that perfect, and there are simply too many people in the world to make oblivion possible. One man will always be left alive to tell the story. Hence, nothing can ever be "practically useless," at least, not in the long run. For the lesson of such stories is simple and within everybody's grasp. Politically speaking, it is that under conditions of terror most people will comply but some people will not, just as the lesson of the countries to which the Final Solution was proposed is that "it could happen" in most places but it did not happen everywhere.

---

41 With (of course) a parallel emphasis on the mind-numbing power of extreme physical privation.
42 See Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil (London: Penguin Classics, 1984), 106, 150 for the extraordinary conscience-related ills that arise when such efforts are insufficiently prioritized. See also Daniel Day Williams, Essays in Process Theology, ed. Perry LeFevre (Chicago, IL: Exploration Press, 1985), 45, 50 for a theistic riff on Arendt's thinking without a banister. "There is an absolute moral obligation" (Williams writes) "to do more than acknowledge and obey moral principles [or teachings or ideologies?], though that is never set aside. There is the absolute obligation to make decisions which bring the good into actuality in those present processes within which one stands. [...] Ethical behavior is genuinely creative [...and it is this understanding that] holds together absoluteness of moral obligation with acknowledgment of the creative and the tragic factors which attend ethical decision in an unfinished world."
44 Cf. Levi, The Drowned and the Saved, 199: "It can happen, and it can happen everywhere. [But] I do not intend to nor can I say that it will happen" (emphasis mine).
45 Note the inverted and distinctly positive role assigned to imperfection.
46 Echoes of Eliot... (Emphasis mine before this line; emphasis original after footnote 47.)
Humanly speaking, no more is required, and no more can reasonably be asked, for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation.\footnote{Arendt, \textit{Eichmann in Jerusalem}, 233.}
4. Conclusion

Throughout Eliot's poem, associations between linguistic shortcomings and religious frustrations are employed to outline a system of spirituality which prioritizes good-faith action over any sort of ultimate end. The fullness of *Four Quartets'* intertextual ethic is encoded within its imperfect, obscure, and often beautiful lines, acting as an ironic proof for an effort-focused hypothesis upon which the volume's value hangs. Writing serves as a mirror for spiritual failures, and stands within *FQ* as an embodied example of combined theological-compositional difficulty: Eliot frames the shortcomings of his deeply religious work within a *lexicon* of linguistic inadequacy. But projects founded on the pursuit of communication and understanding are not wholly hopeless, given (of course) that they prioritize process over product. The ineffability of poetic endeavors and spiritual encounters pose parallel problems for a human audience, and their remedy is similarly intertwined. Like Zeno's arrow, any linear attempt is bound to miss its intended target, but a small shift in perspective—towards a focus on the path itself—turns a paradox into a blessing. If the means is the end, what issue is there with a cyclical or circular route?

Certainty certainly isn't within any reader's purview, and the abundant quandaries inherent in *Four Quartets* do not make for easy exegesis. But if we follow the book's own internal advice, we will be reminded that

```
What we call the beginning is often the end  
And to make an end is to make a beginning,  
The end [—without assurance or presumption—] is where we start from. And every phrase  
And sentence that is right (where every word is at home,  
Taking its place to support the others,  
The word neither diffident nor ostentatious, [...])  
Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,  
Every poem an epitaph.  
[And w]ith the drawing of this Love and the voice of this  
Calling
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.
```
References


