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“THE GREEDY DIALECTIC OF TIME AND ETERNITY”: KARL BARTH, T. S. ELIOT, AND *FOUR QUARTETS*

BY DAVID SOUD

In a 1934 letter to Paul Elmer More, T. S. Eliot affirmed his increasing interest in theology: “I am painfully aware that I need a much more extensive and profound knowledge of theology, for the sort of prose work that I should like to do—for pure literary criticism has ceased to interest me.”¹ It was perhaps inevitable that Eliot should turn from philosophy to theology after his carefully considered and evidently complete conversion to Anglo-Catholicism several years before. Yet, given the theological controversies that dominated Christian thought between the wars, it is surprising that critics have paid relatively little attention to how those debates might have resonated in Eliot’s later poetry—especially his most explicitly theological work, *Four Quartets*.

One indicator of the direction Eliot’s theological studies took is an unpublished 1939 lecture, “Types of English Religious Verse,” in which he briefly forecasts the course of English religious poetry amid the theological controversies of the time. As Paul Murray has pointed out, the controversy that most interested Eliot was the conflict between a previously dominant liberal Protestantism, which extended back through the nineteenth century to Friedrich Schleiermacher, and the so-called Neo-Orthodoxy, which hearkened back to Søren Kierkegaard’s challenge to liberalism and whose unquestioned firebrand was the Swiss theologian Karl Barth. “The main thrust of Eliot’s sympathy,” asserts Murray, “was undoubtedly with the Neo-Orthodox group.”²

Eliot’s allegiance—or at least the locus of his interest—is evident in a revealing stretch of the lecture in which Eliot describes the religious poetry of the future:

[It] will be much more interested in the dogma and the doctrine; in religious thought, rather than purely personal religious feeling. The precursor of this attitude was T. E. Hulme killed in 1917; he was not a religious poet, but his critical ideas took this direction. In more recent times has come an increasing attention paid also by laymen and even by men outside the Church, to scholastic philosophy; and among the

younger English theologians, a revival deeply influenced by Thomism, and to some extent by Karl Barth and Kierkegaard.³

The passage reveals much: not only the theologians Eliot considers most worthy of attention, but also his sense of what the religious poetry of his time entails. It can hardly be read as a mission statement, but it does cast light on Eliot's sense of the theological terrain in the late 1930s. Eliot's debts to Hulme and to the Neo-Thomism of Jacques Maritain are well known; his connection with Barth has gone largely unexamined, despite the fact that Barth is probably the single most influential theologian of the twentieth century.

It would be easy to compartmentalize Barth as a theologian. Since the 1960s, Christian theology has largely retreated from public discourse. But between the wars, and even after, theologians were often public intellectuals; Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Barth himself appeared on the cover of *Time*. Before being expelled from Germany in 1935, Barth served as chief spokesman and lightning rod for Christian opposition to the Nazi regime. But the defining moment of Barth's career came, somewhat ironically, in 1922, the year of *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*. In that year Barth published the second edition of his book-length commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans. As one contemporary put it, the book "exploded like a bomb in the playground of the theologians."⁴ Instantly controversial, *The Epistle to the Romans* inspired a group of young theologians—Barth, Emil Brunner, and Rudolf Bultmann, among others—to elaborate what came to be known as dialectical theology.

Dialectical theology was not a system; it was a dissenting stance and a form of theological critique. It was primarily antagonistic to liberal Protestantism, or at least what liberal Protestantism had largely become. Between the wars, anyone wishing to engage in serious theological deliberation had little choice but to reckon with its challenge, which for the most part meant reckoning with Barth. As the Scottish theologian John Baillie wrote in his 1939 book *Our Knowledge of God*, "nobody seems to be able to talk theology these days without mentioning him."⁵

In England, Barth's work became available gradually. Though a translation of selected essays, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, had appeared in 1928, the 1933 publication of Edwyn Hoskyns's translation of *The Epistle to the Romans*, reviewed favorably by Norman Porteous in the *Criterion*, allowed a broad swath of Anglican lay thinkers access to the book that had precipitated so much debate. Eliot was among them.

For a committed Christian and public intellectual who described himself as combining “a Catholic cast of mind, a Calvinistic heritage, and a Puritanical temperament,” Barthian theology had much to offer—and it is difficult to imagine Eliot not taking up the challenge.⁶ Eliot was certainly conscious of Barth during the composition of *Four Quartets*, and that work’s deliberations about the human condition—situated paradoxically in the dialectic of time and eternity—bear the marks of Barth’s influence.⁷

If Eliot criticism has been slow to explore the Barthian themes in *Four Quartets*, it is not for having failed to recognize them. As early as 1978, Helen Gardner noted, “[t]he concept of the ‘point of intersection’ is a favourite one with Karl Barth, whose *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* was extremely influential in the period just before the war.”⁸ Since her observation, both Ian Glenn and Steve Ellis have called attention to Barthian elements in the *Quartets*. But Ellis, despite making some compelling comparisons of his own, largely directs his readers to Glenn’s article, and Glenn describes Barth as “trying to describe mystical experience” when, to the contrary, Barth was deeply suspicious of mysticism.⁹ It is this anti-mystical stance in Barth that makes his influence on *Four Quartets* most illuminating. Whatever else may be said of *Four Quartets*—and it is a complex poem, the work of a great poet writing toward a kind of consummation—its mystical deliberations are undeniable. But its attitude toward mystical consciousness balances transcendent aspirations with a Barthian skepticism about human possibility. Furthermore, even in its mystical deliberations, *Four Quartets* is above all about moments: moments of grace, moments of encounter, moments of fallen existence. The poem engages in an extended meditation on how to interpret those moments—especially those that present intimations of mystical transcendence, or, as Barth would say, the *Moment* of human-divine encounter.

I. CONTEXTS: BARTH, ELIOT, AND LIBERALISM

The affinities between Barth and Eliot extend back well before Eliot knew of the Swiss theologian’s work, and they are more various and more subtle than might first appear. Above all, both men reacted strongly against the liberalism that had come to dominate Protestant thought. Their sorties against it, though often from different positions, were part of the Protestant debate that in some ways mirrored the modernist controversy in the Roman Catholic Church.

Eliot's reaction stemmed from his deep disenchantment, from an early age, with the Unitarianism in which he was raised and the failure of liberal theology to acknowledge human sinfulness. Eliot would write in the *Criterion* in 1931 that he saw himself as having been raised "outside the Christian fold, in Unitarianism."¹⁰ Unitarianism was the gold standard of liberalism:

New England Unitarianism was the product of a reaction against Calvinism's extreme emphasis on the transcendent majesty of God and in part the product of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century philosophical idealism. Besides being the most "liberal" of the Christian creeds, it was also the most immanentist. For Eliot, the immanent, all pervasive divinity of his family's religion simply evaporated into the all that it pervaded, leaving him in a universe of nonsacred secularity.¹¹

Charles William Eliot, distant relation of the poet and president of Harvard, epitomized Unitarian liberalism when he proposed "a new ideal of God" encompassing "the Jewish Jehovah, the Christian Universal father, the modern physicist's omnipresent and exhaustless Energy, and the biological conception of a Vital Force."¹²

Over the course of his Harvard years, Eliot's rejection of his parents' tradition led him to follow divergent paths; his effort has something in it of a young man dragging a net through Western and non-Western traditions alike in hopes that he might dredge up a system that will satisfy his need for both transcendence and intellectual rigor. Ronald Schuchard describes Eliot's postgraduate experience as "a three-year philosophical-spiritual journey that carried him through the metaphysics of Babbitt, Bergson, Patanjali, Bradley, and Russell in a rigorous inquiry into the nature of the Absolute."¹³ A dialectic crystallizes early between his fascination with mysticism and his rigorous skepticism.

But folded in with Eliot's philosophical skepticism is his deep suspicion of the notion of human progress—a Calvinist sense of sin that remained with him for life. In *For Lancelot Andrewes*, he referred to "the myth of human goodness which for liberal thought replaces the belief in Divine Grace."¹⁴ Years later, in a 1942 letter to Mary Trevelyan, he remarked on a "native Calvinism" he could not shake off.¹⁵ In a 1923 essay savaging Middleton Murry, Eliot placed no faith in any "inner voice"; the "inner voice" merely "breathes the eternal message of vanity, fear, and lust."¹⁶

Eliot found confirmation of his budding sensibility in T. E. Hulme's ebullient rejection of humanism. Schuchard makes a strong case that Eliot was familiar with Hulme as early as 1916 through the offices of

Pound, and may well have met with him personally. At the end of his 1930 essay "Baudelaire," Eliot invokes Hulme with a quotation: "In the light of these absolute values, man himself is judged to be essentially limited and imperfect. He is endowed with Original Sin. While he can occasionally accomplish acts which partake of perfection, he can never himself be perfect."¹⁷ Hulme asserts a categorical difference between the human and the divine: "The *divine* is not *life* at its intensest. It contains in a way an almost *anti-vital* element."¹⁸ That insistence on the gulf between humanity and God would also characterize the dialectical theology of Barth's *The Epistle to the Romans*.

Catholicism did offer a counterweight of sorts to the anti-humanist influence of Hulme. Eliot engaged most closely with the Neo-Thomist thought of Jacques Maritain, at which he arrived through his reading of the reactionary Charles Maurras, whom Eliot would later describe as "une sorte de Virgile qui nous conduisait aux portes du temple."¹⁹ Maritain would remain a touchstone for Eliot. *True Humanism*, the English translation of Maritain's *L'Humanisme integral*, would gain Eliot's endorsement as a foundational text of the Moot, a discussion group on Christianity and culture convened by J. H. Oldham at intervals in the decade following 1937. But as Kristian Smidt notes, Eliot was never entirely comfortable with Maritain's affirmation of human possibility; the "Puritan skepticism" Eliot could not shake was largely incompatible with any humanism, including Maritain's relatively austere Catholic version.²⁰

That "Puritan skepticism" placed him at odds with a Protestant liberalism that "had the considerable advantage of being able, tacitly, to appeal to the common feeling that real progress was being made on all sides by human society." For Eliot, secular and non-Christian humanisms offered no better alternative. In Irving Babbitt, Eliot saw a formidable thinker and erstwhile Buddhist who embodied a non-Christian humanism Eliot could not endorse. In his 1928 essay on Babbitt, he refers to his former teacher's humanism as "a product—a by-product—of Protestant theology in its last agonies."²¹

To Eliot's sensibility, the Christian life offered a frank acknowledgement of the reality that the human condition does not entail an inexorable march of progress but rather, as Barth frames it, "walking upon a ridge between *time* and *eternity* that is narrower than a knife-edge."²² Already in 1919, Eliot could say to Pound, "I am afraid of the life after death."²³ Shortly after his conversion, he wrote to Paul Elmer More, "To me, the phrase 'to be damned for the glory of God' is sense and not paradox; I had far rather walk, as I do, in daily terror

of eternity, than feel that this was only a children's game in which all the contestants would get equally worthless prizes at the end."²⁴ In its evocation of the Puritan minister Jonathan Edwards, that utterance expresses the Calvinistic sense of sin, judgment, and grace that finds a twentieth-century approximation—though with crucial differences—in the theology of Barth.

Barth arrived at his critique of liberalism and humanism less by temperament and cultural inheritance than by personal disillusionment. Raised in the Reformed tradition, Barth was already a minister when the advent of the First World War called into question the liberal theology in which he had been trained. In a retrospective essay, he recalled "the horrible manifesto of the ninety-three German intellectuals who identified themselves before all the world with the war policy of Kaiser Wilhelm II. . . . [A]mong the signatories I discovered the names of almost all my German teachers."²⁵ In that conflation of religion and nationalism, and in the failure of the Church to address the plight of the workers to whom he ministered, Barth saw complacency and arrogance—in a word, sin, which Barth would define in *The Epistle to the Romans* as "the assumption of an independence in which God is forgotten."²⁶ Dialectical theology began as, in Barth's words, "an impetuous movement to dethrone the then dominant, more or less liberal, even positive theology, which indeed only represented the mature stage of a development that had been going on apparently irresistibly for the past two or three centuries."²⁷ Barth and his friend Eduard Thurneysen "made a fresh attempt to learn our theological ABCs," not only returning to the gospels but also studying Kierkegaard and Fyodor Dostoevsky.²⁸

It was this radical revisioning of the meaning of Christianity that led Barth to revise his first, relatively benign 1919 edition of *The Epistle to the Romans* into the bombshell published three years later. In 1923, Barth and like-minded young theologians founded the journal *Zwischen den Zeiten* (*Between the Times*) to promulgate their critique of liberal theology. The journal would last a decade before Barth effectively terminated it by severing his connection. In 1925, Adolf Keller published a seminal article in *The Expositor* in which he labeled the movement "the theology of crisis."²⁹ Keller, who first brought dialectical theology to the attention of the English-speaking theological community, confirmed that, for Barth, liberal theology was "a kind of theological fall."³⁰ As Barth saw it, Protestant theology had engaged in a long campaign to aggrandize the human and domesticate the divine, when the true relation of the human to the divine was one

of perpetual crisis, of the judgment of the eternal on the temporal, of what Kierkegaard had called “infinite qualitative difference” between God and humanity. As Barth put it in *The Epistle to the Romans*, the gospel is not merely good news of salvation, and still less is it a moral guidebook; it is rather “a shattering disturbance, an assault which brings everything into question. For this reason, nothing is so meaningless as the attempt to make a religion out of the Gospel, and to set it as one human possibility in the midst of others” (R, 225).

Barth’s assault on the edifice of liberal theology—seemingly on religion itself—was not unprecedented. Kierkegaard had embarked on a similar crusade in the previous century. But the sheer rhetorical audacity of *The Epistle to the Romans*, and its arrival on German bookshelves in the aftermath of a war that had called into question both Enlightenment and Romantic notions of human progress and divinity, made it incendiary. Barth’s condemnation of liberal theology is withering:

We suppose that we know what we are saying when we say “God.” We assign to Him the highest place in our world: and in so doing we place Him fundamentally on one line with ourselves and with things. . . . We dare to deck ourselves out as His companions. . . . Our well-regulated, pleasurable life longs for some hours of devotion, some prolongation into infinity. And so, when we set God upon the throne of the world, we mean by God ourselves. Under the banners of humility and emotion we rise in rebellion against God. We confound time with eternity. That is our unrighteousness. . . . This secret identification of ourselves with God carries with it our isolation from him. The little God must, quite appropriately, dispossess the great God. (R, 44–45)

That sort of rhetoric, at once pulpit-pounding and intellectually rigorous, was largely alien to the Church of England, which was not only conjoined with the state but chary of the Reformed tradition, and “dominated by epistemological pragmatism, moralism and an aversion to claims of revelation which could not be verified according to rationalistic norms”—in short, an embodiment of much that Barth was questioning.³¹ But what came directly and unequivocally from Barth had already come sardonically from the pens first of Hulme and then of Eliot, whose drily scathing review of liberal theologian Hastings Rashdall’s *Conscience and Christ* had appeared in 1916:

Now it follows almost inevitably, if one holds a theory of conscience similar to Dr. Rashdall’s, that conscience will consist in the usual structure of prejudices of the enlightened middle classes. To this

middle-class conscience the teaching of Jesus is gradually assimilated. . . . All that is anarchic, or unsafe or disconcerting in what Jesus said and did is either denied, or boiled away. . . . For Canon Rashdall the following of Christ is "made easier" by thinking of him "as the being in whom that union of God and man after which all ethical religion aspires is most fully accomplished." Certain saints found the following of Christ very hard, but modern methods have facilitated everything. Yet I am not sure, after reading modern theology, that the pale Galilean has conquered.³²

Eliot's cool sarcasm reflects the comfortable position of a reviewer who can throw a few well-aimed stones into the theological melee from a vantage point above the fray. But the underlying theological bent is clear: that liberalism's removal of the "anarchic, or unsafe, or disconcerting" in Christianity is an attempted domestication of the divine, an evasion of the crisis posed not only by the teachings of Jesus but by the Christian mysteries of the Incarnation, Resurrection, and Atonement. To this extent at least, Eliot's thought followed a line that converged with Barth's. After his conversion, Eliot's affinity with Barth's critique of liberalism became even more pronounced, presented as it was in direct terms reminiscent of Barth himself: "One of the consequences, as it seems to me, of our failure to grasp the proper relation of the Eternal and the Transient, is our *over-estimation of the importance of our own time*. This is natural to an age which, whatever its professions, is still imbued with the doctrine of progress. . . . No age has been more ego-centric, so to speak, than our own."³³

Surprisingly, when in the late 1920s Barth's work began to be felt within the Church of England, it drew significant support, mainly from the Anglo-Catholic community of which Eliot had become a member. Though some Anglican theologians dismissed it as "desperado theology" or "neo-Calvinist transcendental supernaturalism," others saw him as returning Protestantism to first principles.³⁴ In a 1933 article, John Baillie affirmed dialectical theology's "protests against our overweening humanism, our cheap evolutionism, our smug immanentism. . . . [I]n what it has to say about our human significance as over against God and our utter dependence on him for our salvation it is difficult to do anything but rejoice."³⁵ Barth's thought found champions in J. K. Mozley and, much more prominently, Edwyn Hoskyns, who injected Barth forcefully into the Anglican theological conversation even before Hoskyns's translation of *The Epistle to the Romans* appeared in 1933. In that year, a spate of books on Barth appeared in Britain. In 1936, a translation of the first volume of Barth's epic *Church Dogmatics*,

titled *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, appeared in English, and the following year a piece by Barth appeared immediately after Eliot's introductory essay in *Revelation*, a collection edited by Baillie and editor and publisher Hugh Martin. Barth and Eliot, like the other contributors to *Revelation*, read each other's contributions in advance of publication.³⁶

Eliot and Barth did not concur on all things theological—far from it. Eliot's reverence for the Roman Catholic Church as “the great repository of wisdom,” especially in light of its medieval mysticism as well as Thomist thought, led him to embrace several doctrines—Catholic sacramental theology, Marianism, and the mystical *via negativa*, among others—that the Reformed Barth would not accept.³⁷ Anglo-Catholicism was, after all, an attempt “to recall the modern English Church to its ancient, pre-Reformation origins and its persisting Catholic character and heritage.”³⁸

But both Eliot and Barth can be seen as taking a middle way between Catholicism and Reformed Protestantism. Somewhat ironically, Barth's return to first principles of the Reformed tradition resonates with Catholicism in unexpected ways. The Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, one of the most astute and appreciative critics of Barth, regards him as presenting “the most thorough and penetrating display of the Protestant view and the closest rapprochement with the Catholic,” and notes Barth's position as “midway between liberal Protestantism and Catholicism.”³⁹ “His theology,” says von Balthasar, “is lovely.”⁴⁰ Though Barth of course remained resistant to “the unceasingly actual Roman temptation,” he averred that, if forced to make an absolute choice between the liberal “Schleiermacher-Ritschl-Troeltsch interpretation of the Reformation” and Roman Catholicism, he “would rather become a Catholic.”⁴¹ In *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, Barth concedes that he might “come to an agreement in thought even with a Catholic theologian, and even over the subject of the altar sacrament—without any accompanying desire to take it from him.”⁴² And there is in Barth's theology a universalist streak that Eliot would likely find objectionable.⁴³

II. FROM DIALECTICAL THEOLOGY TO *FOUR QUARTETS*

When, in “Types of English Verse,” Eliot refers to “Karl Barth and Kierkegaard” as a strain of theology distinct from Thomism, he is noting the former's debt to the latter. Kierkegaard opened up the space that Barth came to occupy and extend: he was not a systematic theologian but a critical theologian, given to demanding discursive strategies.

Many of Kierkegaard's declaratives—for instance, that there is “a life-and-death enmity” between God and humanity, and that because Christianity is a “divine scandal,” liberal Protestantism has “abolished Christianity under the guise of preserving it”—resonate through Barth's work.⁴⁴ Barth declares in his preface to *The Epistle to the Romans*, “If I have a system, it is limited to a recognition of what Kierkegaard called the ‘infinite qualitative distinction’ between time and eternity, and to my regarding this as possessing negative as well as positive significance” (R, 10). But, as von Balthasar points out, Barth is no abject disciple of Kierkegaard. Von Balthasar notes that Barth's work contains a “refutation of Kierkegaard,” in that while both center on the crisis of the relationship between the eternal and the temporal, Kierkegaard's vision is “unworldly, ascetic, polemic” while Barth's is ultimately “the immense revelation of the eternal light that radiates over all of nature and fulfills every promise; it is God's Yes and Amen to himself and his creation.”⁴⁵

But the most fundamental principle that Barth inherits from Kierkegaard is that of the human condition as paradoxical—because Christianity presents humanity with what the Danish thinker called “The Absolute Paradox” of the Incarnation.⁴⁶ The Incarnation “unites the contradictories, is the eternalizing of the historical and the historicizing of the eternal.”⁴⁷ In light of this irruption of the eternal into the temporal, humanity stands revealed in its sin and guilt, but it also experiences divine grace. The Incarnation is absurd, presenting an incomprehensible and absolute demand that requires a Christian to take a leap of faith and “die to being human in the ordinary sense” in order to be transformed by grace and begin to realize full humanity.⁴⁸ Herein lies the scandal that every form of humanism seeks to repress. Hence Barth's own paradoxical formulation: “Rightly understood, there are no Christians: there is only the eternal opportunity of becoming Christians—an opportunity at once accessible and inaccessible to all men” (R, 321).

But where Kierkegaard uses an often difficult array of discursive moves and shifts of tone, Barth distills his discourse into something more concentrated and prophetic. Central to Barth's theology is the Augustinian distinction between Word and words; Barth acknowledges the inevitable failure of the latter, and attempts to maximize their expressive power without closing off the text. The resulting discourse—the discourse of dialectical theology—leaves its mark on *Four Quartets*.

Barth himself described dialectical theology in terms that reveal his intention to use textual absence as a means of inviting presence:

“a web of radically incomplete thoughts and sentences that point beyond themselves to the ineffable reality of God’s speech to us, which alone can fill up what is missing in our speech.”⁴⁹ More specifically, Barthian discourse trades in paradoxical juxtapositions of affirmation and negation, so as to create kind of semantic void where the divine might make its presence felt:

The genuine dialectician knows that this Center cannot be apprehended or beheld, and he will not if he can help it allow himself to be drawn into giving direct information about it. . . . But on occasions when dialectic utterance has seemed to succeed [in bearing witness], it was not because of what the dialectician did, not because of the assertions he made . . . but because, through his ambiguous and unambiguous assertions, the living Truth in the center, the reality of God, asserted itself.⁵⁰

What emerges as crucial here is the sense of authorial agency—and the lack thereof. The enterprise of paradoxical discourse is itself paradoxical: the author constructs his utterances in order to vacate them. Furthermore, the text’s difficulties paradoxically make it transparent, opening a gap through which the divine may choose to make its presence felt. The dialectician can make nothing happen; he can only open a space in which something might happen. He cannot bear witness, but only seem to succeed in bearing witness. When Eliot in “East Coker” describes each effort to use words as “a different kind of failure,” that sense of communicative passivity is linked, as in Barth, to the unreality of the temporal world and the incapacity of fallen humanity to know God, much less communicate anything about God.⁵¹ Only by accepting abject failure can one get oneself out of the way, so to speak, and let grace perform whatever operations it may.

Similarly, when the speaker in “East Coker” asserts that “the poetry does not matter,” one meaning is that not the words but the spaces between them matter, and the breaches created by paradox in the field of signification. “Burnt Norton” makes this strategy clear:

Words, after speech, reach
Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
Moves perpetually in its stillness. (CPP, 121)

On one level, Eliot is invoking the liturgical “perfect order of speech, and the beauty of incantation” he praises in *The Rock* (CPP, 111). But

more importantly, he is directing attention to the silence and space around the words, not the words themselves. All language, viewed in this way, is paradoxical: fallen and inadequate in itself, it nonetheless opens spaces in which absolute meaning may be glimpsed. If each attempt to speak is, as described in “East Coker,” “a raid on the inarticulate / With shabby equipment always deteriorating,” then what remains is the humble work of communicating in as efficacious a pattern as possible—knowing that the reality incommunicable through words is nonetheless present, and may choose to reveal itself, in the pattern of silences the words form, and most especially in spaces opened by paradox and negation (*CPP*, 128). The words’ very nonbeing then makes possible a vision of Being. Absence makes possible Presence.

Of course, paradox rests at the scriptural heart of Christianity. It takes such prominent forms as Jesus’s assertion in Matthew 10:39 that “He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it” (KJV), and Paul’s cascade of paradoxes in Second Corinthians 6:8–10: “By honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report: as deceivers, yet true; / As unknown, and yet well known, as dying, and, behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; / As sorrowful, yet alway rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things” (KJV). And Christianity’s rich traditions, both Western and Eastern, of apophatic theology—particularly the Neoplatonic strain founded largely on the works of Pseudo-Dionysius—trades heavily in paradox and negation. Eliot knew this rhetorical tradition well through his abiding interest in the mystical *via negativa*.

Barth’s dialectical discourse falls within the range of negative theology as defined by Cleo Kearns: the belief that “any attempt to specify the characteristics or mode of being of the divine is not simply inadequate, which would be a truism, but essentially misleading and even false, because divinity is so far beyond the categories of human understanding and ontology as to make them a hindrance rather than a help to its apprehension.”⁵² But Barth’s deployment of paradox and negation works counter to mystical discourse. Though he continually affirms “the hidden nature of God, unpredictable and irreproducible in human language, and therefore insusceptible of adequate expression in human language,” Barth removes God from all human understanding, including the mystical apprehension that Maritain ranks as the highest degree of knowledge.⁵³

The degree to which Barth uses the discourse of paradox and negation to very different ends from those of the mystic is evident in

comparison with passages from *Four Quartets* that draw on Pseudo-Dionysius and St. John of the Cross. First, from “Burnt Norton”:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from
nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline.

(*CPP*, 119)

Critics have long noted this passage’s source in *The Mystical Theology* of Pseudo-Dionysius: “It is not immovable, moving, or at rest. It has no power, it is not power, nor is it light. It does not live, nor is it life. It is not a substance, nor is it eternity or time.”⁵⁴ A similar allusion, this one to St. John of the Cross and even closer to direct quotation, occurs in “East Coker”:

To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
In order to possess what you do not possess
You must go by a way of dispossession.
In order to arrive at what you are not
You must go through the way in which you are not.

(*CPP*, 127)

Eliot has now turned his dialectic not on the nature of God but on the surrender and transformation of the individual self. Again, the source—in this case St. John’s *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*—is unmistakable:

In order to arrive at having pleasure in everything,
Desire to have pleasure in nothing.
In order to arrive at possessing everything,
Desire to possess nothing.
In order to arrive at being everything,
Desire to be nothing.
In order to arrive at knowing everything,
Desire to know nothing.
In order to arrive at that wherein thou hast no pleasure,
Thou must go by a way wherein thou hast no pleasure.
In order to arrive at that which thou knowest not,
Thou must go by a way that thou knowest not.
In order to arrive at that which though possessest not,
Thou must go by a way that thou possessest not.
In order to arrive at that which thou art not,
Thou must go through that which thou art not.⁵⁵

Eliot is of course grounding the mystical deliberations of *Four Quartets* in the authority of a great practitioner of the *via negativa*. The passage in “East Coker” and its source are well known.

Unlike those of Barth, the paradoxes and negations of St. John of the Cross function not to open a space in which the divine might reveal itself, but to confound the self into self-negation, the self-emptying of active purgation through which the individual opens himself to divine infusion. This is the

Internal darkness, deprivation
And destitution of all property,
Desiccation of the world of sense,
Evacuation of the world of fancy

enjoined in “Burnt Norton” as the way of descent (*CPP*, 120–21).

But for Barth, the mystics do not go far enough. The paradoxical negations of dialectical theology are constructed to exceed those of the *via negativa*: “God is pure negation. He is both ‘here’ and ‘there.’ He is the negation of the negation in which the other world contradicts this world and this world the other world. He is the death of our death and the non-existence of our non-existence” (*R*, 142). Push the negations far enough, and they become resounding affirmations. This is one way Barth indicates the “Yes” concealed in the divine “No.”

A passage from *The Epistle to the Romans* reveals how Barth uses the discourse of paradox and negation toward an end quite different from that of St. John of the Cross:

When history points beyond itself and discovers in itself its own inadequacy, when there emerges in history a horror at history, then its high places are made known. When an impress of revelation is nothing but a sign-post to Revelation, the impress is itself eternal reality; when the waiting of the pious is veritably only an expectancy which drives out all memory of piety, this waiting IS a waiting in the Kingdom of God; when a solid sense of possession is known to be itself wholly questionable, the possession is eternally solid. The whole course of this world participates in true existence when its non-existence is recognized. (*R*, 90–91)

This is apophatic theology minus the mysticism. Every construction makes plain the unreality of the earthly in relation to the eternal. There is no possibility here of human effort leading to a vision of transcendence—only a humble acknowledgement of the unreality of the temporal world under judgment from the eternal. Barth’s paradoxes

open onto a different sort of *via negativa*: only after we have recognized the world and ourselves as a waste land, realized that we cannot collaborate in our own redemption, and accepted divine grace can we enter the Christian life.

Significantly, the passage allows for moments of revelation. As Barth asserts in *Church Dogmatics*, “God may speak to us through Russian communism or a flute concerto, a blossoming shrub or a dead dog. We shall do well to listen to Him if He really does so.”⁵⁶ We may be gifted by grace with moments of illumination, but we must not misread them as signs of our righteousness, or as intimations of our ability to reach any sort of divinization.

Rather than accept that contemplative practice might manage to bridge the immeasurable gulf between sinful humanity and God, Barth insists that human effort does not cooperate with grace, that only by God’s judgment and action in favor of humanity via the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of Christ is humanity restored to communion with its creator. Mysticism, says Barth, is both unnecessary and dangerous. He argues against “incautious use of . . . mystical ideas, of the union of God and humanity . . . whenever these ideas are used other than in an eschatologically ensured connection”—in other words, to speak of union on this side of death is delusion.⁵⁷ Above all, Barth is wary of the lure of the *via negativa*: “There is no limit to the righteousness of men: it may run not only to self-glorification, but also to self-annihilation, as it does in Buddhism and mysticism and pietism. The latter is a more terrible misunderstanding than the former, because it lies so near to the righteousness of God” (R, 109). Mysticism, even in its seeming fulfillment, only highlights the human condition of distance from the divine. “The mystic’s ‘Way of Denial,’” he declares, “is a blind alley, as are all ‘ways.’ The only way is the Way, and that Way is Christ” (R, 316). Even contemplative prayer can only “serve to make clear how little the man of prayer is able to escape from what he himself has thought and experienced, how utterly he—yes, precisely he—is a man and no more” (R, 316). Mystical aspirations are likely to leave one “unable to reckon with anything except feelings and experiences and events” (R, 53).

Barth’s critique of mysticism is another aspect of his thought that may have linked him in Eliot’s mind with Kierkegaard. As Murray has pointed out, Eliot was likely aware of the Danish theologian’s dismissal of mystics.⁵⁸ In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard refers to mysticism as “not only a dangerous road but a wrong road.”⁵⁹ He goes on to elaborate his central criticism of mystics: that their attempt at nonattachment, their

passivity as they wait for exalted experiences, is both an abdication of responsibility and a kind of spiritual addiction. All human beings are bound to choose for themselves how they will inhabit the world, but the mystic “chooses himself abstractly; one can therefore say that he is continually choosing himself out of the world.”⁶⁰ Kierkegaard scorns the mystical hunger for intimations of transcendence: “It is frightful to read a mystic’s laments over the flat moments.”⁶¹ The closing utterance of Eliot’s “Burnt Norton”—“Ridiculous the waste sad time / Stretching before and after”—stands rebuked by Barth’s admonition and Kierkegaard’s disdain (*CPP*, 122).

Eliot, of course, did not fully share Barth’s or Kierkegaard’s wariness of mysticism; his writings abound in allusions to Christian and non-Christian mystics and to mystical practice. Schuchard reasonably asserts that, by the time he wrote *Ash-Wednesday*, Eliot was “a committed follower of St. John [of the Cross] and the way of contemplation, a way that necessitates moving through the dark night of sense and desire, and purging the memory and the will, in order to attain the divine union.”⁶² In 1928, he even took a vow of celibacy. But Eliot denied being a mystic himself. In a 1961 interview, he suggested that being a poet—even at times a devotional poet—barred him from being a mystic: “I don’t think I am a mystic at all, though I have always been much interested in mysticism. . . . A great many people of sensibility have had some more or less mystical experiences. That doesn’t make them mystics. To be a mystic is a whole-time job—so is poetry.”⁶³ He had made a similar remark in his 1927 essay on Blake. Further, in his 1928 review of the *Selected Letters* of Baron Friedrich von Hügel, Eliot turned a skeptical eye: “Mysticism—even the particular Christian mysticism studied by von Hügel—is not the issue of our time. We are able to quote with approval that remark of Bossuet: ‘true mysticism is so rare and unessential, and false mysticism so common and dangerous that one cannot oppose it too firmly.’”⁶⁴ Eliot’s sense that any claim to mystical consciousness needs careful sifting must be counted an important ingredient in his approach to mysticism.

In the Clark Lectures of 1926, Eliot had already incorporated an element of skepticism into his understanding of mysticism, in the form of his distinction between “classical” and “romantic” mysticisms. Interestingly, Eliot placed St. John of the Cross, as well as the other sixteenth-century Spanish mystics, firmly in the latter camp, as opposed to the higher, more impersonal and intellectual mysticism of the Thomists, Richard of St. Victor, and Dante. In a revealing stretch of his lecture on Richard Crashaw, Eliot makes a telling distinction

between St. Theresa of Avila's "tendency to *substitute* divine love for human love, and for the former to take on the characteristics of the latter"—something Barth would surely identify as idolatry—and Dante's awareness "that human love and divine love were different, and one could not be substituted for the other without the distortion of human nature." This failure to acknowledge the enormous difference between creature and Creator—this "substitution of the divine passion by the human"—had vitiated the devotional verse of recent centuries.⁶⁵ Eliot's assessment of the risks of "romantic" mysticism parallels Barth's caution about how one can misread the movements of divine grace:

The unity of the divine will is divided only that it may be revealed in overcoming this division. But it is only too easy to confuse this invisible occurrence in God with that observable series of psychophysical experiences in which it is manifested. Or, to put this another way, the observable flux of human experience which points to the transformation of that experience in God may be projected backwards metaphysically into the will of God. Men will then direct their attention, not towards the Unknown God, but towards their own selves; and the continuity which they perceive existing between their lower and their higher experiences will appear to them invested with transcendent sanction and authority. (R, 189)

Understanding the role of Barth's theology in *Four Quartets* requires an awareness of how he regarded mysticism as treacherous territory, rife with opportunities for self-delusion and spiritual experience-seeking.

And Eliot certainly had powerful experiences. Lyndall Gordon cites the poet's experience of a transcendent silence on the streets of Boston in 1910 and then in Paris a year later as defining moments in his life. The poem that issued from the first such experience of what Gordon calls "the timeless moment" concludes, "You may say what you will, / At such peace I am terrified / There is nothing else beside."⁶⁶ Barry Spurr quotes Wallace Fowlie's account of how, in Boston in 1932 or 1933, Eliot fell "flat on his face in the aisle, with his arms stretched out" after receiving the Eucharist, in what Fowlie realized was "a mystical experience."⁶⁷ The moment in the hyacinth garden in *The Waste Land* has often been read as mystical. But the only sustained treatment of such moments occurs in *Four Quartets*. Eliot told Smidt that in the *Quartets* he was "seeking to express equivalents for small experiences he had had, as well as for mystical insight derived from his reading."⁶⁸ The most prominent rendering of such a "small experience" is the rose garden sequence in "Burnt Norton."

Donald Childs sees *Four Quartets* as exploring “a dynamic tension between the momentary mystical experience of belief as absolutely powerful and valid and the daily experience of belief as a series of propositions that (from the pragmatic point of view) do not absolutely work.”⁶⁹ While Childs grasps that the poem is built around a dialectic, he misreads the point of contention: it is an issue not of faith *per se* but of the proper form of faith. This question is where the Anglo-Catholic and Calvinist sides of Eliot’s character come into fruitful collision.

The fact that “Burnt Norton” was originally a stand-alone poem is important to this reading. The intervening years between it and “East Coker” involved serious, sometimes devastating reassessments for Eliot, from personal crises to the onset of the Second World War. His deliberations at the close of *The Idea of a Christian Society*, written shortly after the Munich Accords, reveal how events had led him back to an acute sense of human sinfulness: “The feeling which was new and unexpected was a feeling of humiliation, which seemed to demand an act of personal contrition, of humility, repentance and atonement; what had happened was something in which one was deeply implicated and responsible.”⁷⁰

For over two decades, Eliot had confidently condemned the arrogance and complacency of liberalism and humanism. Now he felt himself enmeshed in what he disdained. In the final issue of the *Criterion*, he described his feeling as “a depression of spirits so different from any other experience of fifty years as to be a new emotion.”⁷¹ Eliot was, as he mentioned in a later interview, thrown in on himself by the onset of the war.⁷² His Calvinistic sense of human sinfulness, and of the catastrophic breach between time and eternity, had ample room to reassert itself after the more sanguine, somewhat Neoplatonic sensibility that supports “Burnt Norton” came into question. Lyndall Gordon notes, “Until *Burnt Norton*, Eliot aspired to the way up [“the way up” is a key phrase in Gordon’s biography] of the chosen, those who live perpetually in the light of grace, but after his imaginative encounter with the Furies of 1934–39, he aligned himself, in the later *Quartets*, with the other party, the flawed beings who must be remade.” It may be more accurate to say that he aligned himself and all humanity in a Barthian estrangement from the divine. The wartime *Quartets* explore a “way down” that presumes “the otherness of the divine spirit” and requires “an operation on Original Sin.”⁷³ Such an operation cannot be performed by the patient.

Those same years—the years following Hoskyns’s translation of *The Epistle to the Romans*—saw Barth gain increasing prominence

in Anglican discourse, and connect with Eliot both as a topic of the Moot and as a fellow contributor to *Revelation*. If, in the course of his theological deliberations, Eliot had not yet given serious attention to Barth when he wrote “Burnt Norton,” it is difficult to believe he had not filled that gap by the time he began “East Coker.”

There is a shift in sensibility from “Burnt Norton,” an only implicitly religious poem in which humanity’s fallen condition receives far less emphasis than the moments in which it is transcended, and the wartime *Quartets*, with their explicit religiousness, their far more sober deliberations about the human condition, and their deferral of beatitude. But the first movement of “Burnt Norton,” the rose garden sequence, remains the keynote of the larger work; its theme is modified but never abandoned. The later *Quartets* continue, in a more chastened manner, an interrogation of transcendent experience that begins in the rose garden.

Denis Donoghue describes the vision, in appropriately Dantean terms, as “an intuition of divine grace, given lest we despair . . . an epitome, a sample of the ultimate experience, beatitude, the Heaven of God’s presence.”⁷⁴ What remains of “Burnt Norton” is essentially follow-through: a consideration of ordinary existence in light of that revelatory moment, a discursive reflection in which “the distinction between the Timeless and the temporal becomes the distinction between the Word and words.”⁷⁵ In marking that “infinite qualitative distinction,” Eliot begins the dialectic that measures mystical experience against Barthian theology.

III. FROM THE DIALECTIC TO THE MOMENT

“The moment in the rose-garden,” as Eliot recalls it later in “Burnt Norton,” constitutes what Barth, following and developing Kierkegaard, calls “the eternal ‘Moment’ of the knowledge of God” (*R*, 188), the timeless Moment of human-divine encounter, to which Glenn has pointed as a crucial connection between Barthian theology and *Four Quartets*.⁷⁶ This Moment is a central trope in Barthian theology. It is an unveiling, an entry into the mysterious intersection of time and eternity effected through Christ:

Then it is that we perceive the time in which we stand to be the present time, that is to say, the ocean of concrete, observable reality, in which the submarine island of the “Now” of divine revelation is altogether submerged but remains, nevertheless, intact, in spite of its shallow covering of observable things. This “Now” (iii. 21), this “Moment”

beyond all time, when men stand before God, this “Point” from which we come, but which is no point in the midst of other points, Jesus Christ crucified and risen,—is the Truth. All that is before and after this “Moment of moments,” everything which encircles, like a plane, this “Point” which cannot be reproduced,—is time. . . . And so, the time in which we live conceals and yet preserves Eternity within it, speaks not of Eternity yet proclaims it in its silence. (*R*, 304)

This is “the point of intersection of the timeless / With time” (*CPP*, 136)—the point at which, as Barth famously asserted, “God intersects vertically, from above” (*R*, 30). And it is, as “The Dry Salvages” makes clear, inseparable from that “gift half understood . . . Incarnation” (*CPP*, 136). The wartime *Quartets* resound with Barth’s doctrine of the Incarnation as the supreme Moment, the supreme point of intersection:

In this name [Jesus Christ] two worlds meet and go apart, two planes intersect, the one known and the other unknown. The known plane is God’s creation, fallen out of its union with Him, and therefore the world of the “flesh” needing redemption, the world of men, and of time, and of things—our world. This known plane is intersected by another plane that is unknown—the world of the Father, of the Primal Creation, and of the final Redemption. The relation between us and God, between this world and His world, presses for recognition, but the line of intersection is not self-evident. The point on the line of intersection at which the relation becomes observable and observed is Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth, the historical Jesus. . . . The particularity of the years A.D. 1-30 is dissolved by this divine definition, because it makes every epoch a potential field of revelation and disclosure. (*R*, 29)

Here is the language of intersection noted by Gardner, joined with a vision of the Incarnation as both a unique, historically specific occurrence and a timeless communication from the divine that makes revelation possible throughout all time.⁷⁷ In this sense, the Incarnation is the Moment that makes possible all Moments. The Incarnation thus becomes the figure in the carpet of time; in a favorite metaphor, Barth describes it as “the crimson thread which runs through all history” (*R*, 96).

The Moment is both an illumination and a destruction. It confers divine grace, and that very grace forces a crisis in which a person’s “inner life is radically broken down,” and through which “everything before and after is set in a new context” (*R*, 125). For those caught up in the Moment, “the roots of their being are lit up, as by a flash of lightning . . . for, since men are what they are not, the roots of their existence

are deeply buried in the unity of God" (*R*, 343). Barth here uses the rhetoric of paradox and illumination as would a mystical theologian, but the Moment will likely be not a taste of transcendence or any "new, deep, positive, religious experience," but a devastating recognition of one's nonbeing confronted with the hyperessentiality of God (*R*, 125).

It is for this reason that "human kind/Cannot bear very much reality" (*CPP*, 118). The children in the leaves, hidden below Barth's "shallow cover of observable things" (*R*, 304) and precipitating the bird's command to "Go, go, go," (*CPP*, 118) embody the exhilarating but terrifying possibility that reality will emerge in all its annihilating glory. "When eternity confronts human existence," asserts Barth, "it renders that existence sinful" (*R*, 245); too direct a confrontation with eternity, without the protective "enchainment of past and future," would leave a human being naked before "heaven and damnation / Which flesh cannot endure" (*CPP*, 119).

For Barth, the crisis of the Moment is not so much precipitated as revealed, because it is perpetual, though unseen; it is "quick now, here, now, always" (*CPP*, 122). At its heart is Jesus Christ. "Through Jesus Christ men are judged by God" Barth declares. "This is their KRISIS, but it is both negation and affirmation, both death and life" (*R*, 69). In Barth's substitutionary doctrine of Atonement, God became human in Jesus Christ so as to accept, on humanity's behalf, the judgment of eternity on time and sin, so that rather than face only divine justice, humanity can be mercifully elected to salvation, restored eschatologically to its original union with God. The divine "No" is not unsaid, but is joined to a divine "Yes"—both responses encompassed by the death and Resurrection of Christ. The human condition, transformed by that paradoxical event, now finds life in death, and death in life. Suspended thus, humanity is "in the aspect of time / Caught in the form of limitation / Between un-being and being"—capable of being taken into the Moment, but only profiting from such a descent of grace if willing to surrender the self and allow it to be remade (*CPP*, 122).

The proper response to the Moment is therefore to surrender to the destruction and regeneration it offers, and to accept one's nonbeing in the face of God's being—to do otherwise is effectively idolatry. In "Burnt Norton," however, Eliot seeks to anchor himself to the Moment as it exists in time rather than to understand it as perpetual. His course involves a practice of remembrance:

To be conscious is not to be in time
But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,
The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,

The moment in the draughty church at smokefall
Be remembered; involved with past and future.
Only through time time is conquered. (*CPP*, 119–20)

Here, Eliot catalogs an array of “moments” in which he presumably glimpsed transcendence. As Dominic Manganiello observes, Eliot’s meditation on these moments follows Augustine’s theory of memory as the seat of self-consciousness and therefore as a means of devotional practice.⁷⁸ Barth concurs with the importance of memory, but not with the idea of remembering experiences as a form of devotion. Also drawing on Augustine, he affirms the Moment as itself a kind of remembrance, because the relationship between God and humanity “can be re-established only through the—*clearly seen*—memory of eternity breaking in upon our minds and hearts” (*R*, 48).

But Barth stresses the difficulty of that vision: “there are mystics and ecstasies who have never *seen clearly*. The encounter of grace depends on no human possession”—even, in the final analysis, experiences (*R*, 59). It is all too easy to have “had the experience but missed the meaning” (*CPP*, 133). In his essay following Eliot’s in the 1937 book *Revelation*, Barth asserts that even if humanity is confirmed in receiving divine grace, “Human experience has no power of its own to become . . . a reminder of such a confirmation. And that is the error again and again made at this point.”⁷⁹ Looking for authentic wisdom in human experience is confounding time with eternity. “Burnt Norton” closes with lines indicating Eliot’s attachment to the Moment at the expense of less exalted experience: “Ridiculous the waste sad time / Stretching before and after” (*CPP*, 122). Barth, like Kierkegaard, would see in this a spiritual sickness—an idolatry of experiences. “Ecstasies and illuminations, inspirations and intuitions, are not necessary,” he asserts. “Happy are they who are worthy to receive them! But woe be to us, if we wait anxiously for them!” (*R*, 298).

In the wartime *Quartets*, the dialectic shifts toward a more Barthian understanding of “ecstasies and illuminations”; these poems partly trace Eliot’s efforts to overcome an idolatry of exalted experiences. Eliot retained his interest in mystical experience and contemplative practice, but the five intervening years had brought a reassessment of what those “moments” meant in light of Eliot’s chastened conviction that “The only wisdom we can hope to acquire / Is the wisdom of humility” (*CPP*, 126). “East Coker” marks the turn. Rather than regarding his “moments” as devaluing ordinary experience, he now sees them as “echoed ecstasy / Not lost, but requiring, pointing to the agony / Of death and birth” (*CPP*, 127).

The syntax here, in which death precedes birth, suggests the death to self on which the Christian life is predicated—but this need not be a mystical death. Linked with Eliot's evocations of mysticism is a new, recognizably Barthian conviction that the Moment is not an answer but a devastating question, a demand, to which Eliot has no adequate response other than self-negation. It is not that Eliot has found the *via negativa* more difficult than he anticipated—given his long study of and prior writings about mysticism, that could hardly be the case—but rather that he is questioning, in a Barthian sense, his own ability to understand and evaluate his experiences. After all, the “wisdom of old men,” so witheringly castigated in “East Coker,” and so ruthlessly interrogated by Barth, might well include that of a good many advocates of mysticism (*CPP*, 125).⁸⁰

This new emphasis on what the Moment requires and points to explains the careful delineation of three kinds of darkness—“dark dark dark”—in “East Coker” (*CPP*, 126). The first dark, the non-being that inhabits and awaits all the carefully constructed and maintained selves of fallen humanity, is altogether different from the “darkness of God” that descends in contemplation, which in turn must not be confused with the blank inertia that masquerades as contemplative darkness but is in fact a kind of vacuous solipsism. But the three extended similes of darkness that follow remain ambiguous. The extinguishing of lights between scenes in a theater, the darkness of a paused tube train in which passengers confront “the growing terror of nothing to think about,” and the experience under ether of being “conscious but conscious of nothing” might point to the divine darkness, but they could as easily suggest spiritual inertia (*CPP*, 126). The dash after “conscious of nothing” truncates the chain of similes, an anacoluthon that leaves the meaning of the sequence unresolved. The only conclusion to be drawn is that, insofar as possible, a practitioner of the *via negativa* must be able to distinguish one form of darkness from another. It is this discernment that Barth calls into question:

The mystics, and we all in so far as we are mystics, have been wont to *assert* that what annihilates and enters into man, the Abyss into which he falls, the Darkness to which he surrenders himself, the No before which he stands is *God*; but this we are incapable of *proving*. The only part of our assertion of which we are *certain*, the only part we can *prove*, is that man is negated, negated. But man here on earth can never be more negative than the negativity from which he *emerged*. What then can the way of self-criticism do but somehow magnify to gigantic size the question mark set up beyond life's boundary?⁸¹

Having measured his mysticism against Barthian doubt, Eliot determines not to gauge his spiritual condition according to isolated experiences, or to expect too much from them. The Anglo-Catholic aspect of the poem affirms that a true saint can “apprehend / The point of intersection of the timeless / With time,” but Eliot is no saint, and must accept that, for him as for many others, “there is only the unattended / Moment, the moment in and out of time” (*CPP*, 136). In light of this new humility about trying to decipher the pattern of human experience, he resolves to stop privileging moments of transcendence:

Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
Of dead and living. Not the intense moment
Isolated, with no before and after,
But a lifetime burning in every moment,
And not the lifetime of one man only
But of old stones that cannot be deciphered. (*CPP*, 129)

As David Moody observes, “The poet is now not transcending but entering into history.”⁸² And entering into history means moving beyond “the lifetime of one man only” into a restored sense of communal responsibility (*CPP*, 129). Murray, citing Eliot’s note for “East Coker” that reads “To get beyond time and at the same time, deeper into time,” sees this passage as suggesting that Eliot has taken to heart Kierkegaard’s critique of mysticism.⁸³ It certainly recalls a remark in *Either/Or*: “The true concrete choice is the one by which I choose myself back into the world the very same moment I choose myself out of the world.”⁸⁴

Only, then, by embracing what Barth calls “the greedy dialectic of time and eternity,” by not engaging in an idolatry of exalted experiences, can Eliot approach an authentic Christian life (*R*, 530). Inseparable from that dialectic is the boundary of death, and the Eliot of the wartime *Quartets*, having relinquished his pursuit of the mystical life, places his allegiance there. Moody suggests that much of Eliot’s poetry points to that boundary, such that “it is only in his death that man can be united with the divine.”⁸⁵ Eliot’s evident conviction may not be entirely true of his Anglo-Catholicism, with its affirmation of mystical union, but it falls squarely in line with the theology of Barth. For Barth, “[w]hat is in time has not yet reached the boundary of death, has not yet been taken under the government of God. It must yet die in order to enter into life.”⁸⁶

In “The Dry Salvages,” accepting the dialectic of time and eternity allows for “an approach to the meaning” which Eliot had previously “missed,” because it is “beyond any meaning / We can assign to happiness” (*CPP*, 133). Within that dialectic, moments of human happiness—even of “sudden illumination”—have no more and no less reality than “moments of agony” (*CPP*, 133). Every moment is “a new and shocking / Valuation of all we have been” (*CPP*, 125), because every moment of time stands judged by eternity, and every moment is also a “point of intersection” we must strive, however failingly, to “apprehend” (*CPP*, 136).

In this light, the light of “Little Gidding,” “history is a pattern of timeless moments” (*CPP*, 144). Barth says precisely this:

We spend our years as a tale that is told—this is the secret of time which is made known in the ‘Moment’ of revelation, in that eternal ‘Moment’ which always is, and yet is not. Time is, then, irreversible; and of this the irrevocable hurrying away of the past and the relentless approach of the future are a parable. But a parable of it also is the completely hidden, unobservable, intangible present which lies ‘between’ the times. Facing, as it does, both ways, each moment in time bears within it the unborn secret of revelation, and every moment can be thus qualified—*This do, knowing the time*. And so, the known time—apprehended and comprehended in its transcendental significance—provides the occasion for the incomprehensible action of love. Wherever a moment in the past or in the future has been qualified by the *Now* of revelation that lies in the midst between the two, there is the opportunity for the occurrence of love. (*R*, 497–98)

The passage reads almost like an abstract of the last two movements of “Little Gidding.” As Barth makes clear and Eliot affirms, Love is the “incomprehensible action”—“the unfamiliar Name” (*CPP*, 144)—which is, in fact, the “transcendental significance” of each moment in the “pattern” of history; which can be found “*Now*,” “in the stillness / Between two waves of the sea” (*CPP*, 145); and which points to right action: “*This do, knowing the time*.” In this celebration of the “Yes” concealed within the divine “No,” Barth lays bare his joyous vision of the Incarnation. It is this vision of redemption that provides Eliot with the means for a climactic synthesis encompassing both mystical aspiration and human sinfulness, both his Anglo-Catholic and his Calvinist sensibilities. Fortified with a Barthian acceptance of both human limitation and infinite grace, “Little Gidding” turns first to the affirming showings of Julian of Norwich, and ultimately to Eliot’s chief poetic tutelary spirit, Dante, who, having hovered in the background

throughout the *Quartets*, has come to the fore in “Little Gidding.” A crescendo of images, allusions, and quotations culminates in a Dantean anticipation of the afterlife, “When the tongues of flame are in-folded / Into the crowned knot of fire / And the fire and the rose are one” (*CPP*, 145). That final, resounding, monosyllabic “one” points beyond the boundary of death, where, for both Eliot and Barth, the dialectic of time and eternity is resolved.

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NOTES

¹ Eliot to Paul Elmer More, 20 June 1934, quoted in Roger Kojcky, *T. S. Eliot's Social Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), 78.

² Paul Murray, *T. S. Eliot and Mysticism: The Secret History of “Four Quartets”* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1991), 112.

³ T. S. Eliot, “Types of English Religious Verse,” unpublished manuscript, 1939, King's College Library, Cambridge, the Hayward Bequest, HB/P/11/b, 21.

⁴ D. Densil Morgan, *Barth Reception in Britain* (London: T&T Clark International, 2010), 21.

⁵ C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson, eds. 1918–1945, Volume 2 of *The Twentieth-Century Mind: History, Ideas, and Literature in Britain* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972), 165.

⁶ Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (1943; repr. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2009), 243.

⁷ In addition to Norman Porteous's 1933 review of Edwyn C. Hoskyns's translation for the *Criterion*, and Eliot's 1939 lecture, Karl Barth receives more mention than any other thinker in the minutes of the Moot, often in the remarks of John Baillie. Eliot was surely also cognizant of Barth's Gifford Lectures at the University of Aberdeen in 1937–38, published in 1938 as *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God*.

⁸ Helen Gardner, *The Composition of “Four Quartets”* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), 145.

⁹ Ian Glenn, “Karl Barth and T. S. Eliot,” *Standpunkte* 35.1 (1982): 35. See Steve Ellis, *The English Eliot: Design, Language and Landscape in “Four Quartets”* (London: Routledge, 1991), 131–33.

¹⁰ Eliot, review of Middleton Murry's *Son of Woman*, *Criterion* 10.41 (1931): 771.

¹¹ Eugene Webb, *The Dark Dove: The Sacred and Secular in Modern Literature* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1975), 198.

¹² Barry Spurr, “Anglo-Catholic in Religion”: *T. S. Eliot and Christianity* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2010), 5.

¹³ Ronald Schuchard, *Eliot's Dark Angel: Intersections of Life and Art* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 68.

¹⁴ Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrewes* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), 63–64.

¹⁵ Eliot to Mary Trevelyan, 21 February 1942, quoted in Spurr, 13.

¹⁶ Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 3rd enlarged ed. (1951; London: Faber and Faber, 1980), 27.

¹⁷ Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 430.

¹⁸ T. E. Hulme, *Selected Writings* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 188.

¹⁹ Kojcky, 62. The passage translates, “a kind of Virgil who led us to the doors of the temple”—to the doors only, because Maurras, an atheist, did not himself enter.

²⁰ Kristian Smidt, *Poetry and Belief in the Work of T. S. Eliot* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 55. For actual proceedings of the Moot, see *The Moot Papers: Faith, Freedom and Society 1938–1944*, ed. Keith Clements, Continuum imprint (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 145.

²¹ Cox and Dyson, 146; Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 475.

²² Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (1928; repr. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith Publisher, 1978), 188.

²³ Schuchard, 119.

²⁴ Denis Donoghue, *Words Alone: The Poet T. S. Eliot* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2000), 273.

²⁵ Barth, “Concluding Unscientific Postscript,” in *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom*, ed. Clifford Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 70.

²⁶ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Hoskyns (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1933), 168. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated R.

²⁷ Barth, “The Humanity of God,” in *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom*, 48.

²⁸ “Concluding Unscientific Postscript,” in *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom*, 72.

²⁹ Morgan, 9.

³⁰ Morgan, 9.

³¹ Morgan, 3.

³² Eliot, review of *Conscience and Christ*, in *International Journal of Ethics* 27.1 (1916): 111–12.

³³ Eliot, “A Commentary,” *Criterion* 12.46 (1932): 75.

³⁴ Morgan, 104.

³⁵ Morgan, 164.

³⁶ Glenn, 35.

³⁷ Spurr, 45.

³⁸ Spurr, 64.

³⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 23, 30.

⁴⁰ von Balthasar, 25.

⁴¹ Barth, “The Humanity of God,” 64; von Balthasar, 31.

⁴² Barth, *The Word of God*, 133.

⁴³ In his Gifford Lecture titled “God’s Decision and Man’s Election,” Barth reframes the Calvinist doctrine of election to mean that, through Christ, all humanity is elected to salvation. Barth did not deny charges of universalism, pointing instead to Colossians 1:19, in which Paul affirms that what God accomplished through Christ is to “reconcile all things unto himself” (KJV), and asserting that it would be arrogant to set “any limits on our side to the friendliness of God toward humanity” (Barth, “The Humanity of God,” 64).

⁴⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Autobiographical, 1848–1855*, vol. 6 of *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1978), 313, 337, 354.

⁴⁵ von Balthasar, 26; Barth, *Romans*, 10–11.

⁴⁶ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, vol. 7 of *Kierkegaard’s Writings*, ed. H. Hong and E. Hong (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000), 61.

⁴⁷ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 61.

⁴⁸ Kierkegaard, *Autobiographical*, 313.

⁴⁹ von Balthasar, *Theology of Karl Barth*, 78.

⁵⁰ Barth, *The Word of God*, 206–11.

⁵¹ Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950* (1950; repr. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1980), 128. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated CPP.

⁵² Cleo McNelly Kearns, “Negative Theology and Literary Discourse in *Four Quartets*: A Derridean Reading,” in *Words in Time: New Essays on Eliot’s “Four Quartets,”* ed. Edward Lobb (London: The Athlone Press, 1993), 131.

⁵³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 13 vol., trans. G. T. Thompson (1936; repr. London: T&T Clark, 1963), 1:149.

⁵⁴ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, Classics of Western Spirituality series (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 141.

⁵⁵ Gardner, 107. Gardner quotes the Allison Peers translation, which Eliot owned.

⁵⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 60.

⁵⁷ Barth, “Feuerbach,” in *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom*, 94.

⁵⁸ Murray, *T. S. Eliot and Mysticism*, 113.

⁵⁹ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 3 of *Kierkegaard’s Writings*, ed. and trans. H. Hong and E. Hong (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1987), 247.

⁶⁰ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 249.

⁶¹ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 242.

⁶² Schuchard, 155.

⁶³ Murray, 1.

⁶⁴ Murray, 4.

⁶⁵ Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. Schuchard (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1993), 166–67.

⁶⁶ Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 23, 56.

⁶⁷ Spurr, 121.

⁶⁸ Smidt, *The Importance of Recognition: Six Chapters on T. S. Eliot* (Trykk, Norway: A. S. Pedder Norbye, 1973), 42.

⁶⁹ Donald Childs, *Mystic, Son and Lover* (London: The Athlone Press, 1997), 221.

⁷⁰ Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), 65.

⁷¹ Eliot, “Last Words,” *Criterion* 18.71 (1939): 274.

⁷² See Ronald Bush, *T. S. Eliot: A Study in Character and Style* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984), 208.

⁷³ Gordon, 340.

⁷⁴ Donoghue, 258.

⁷⁵ Bernard Bergonzi, ed., *T. S. Eliot: Four Quartets*, Casebook Series (1969; repr. Houndsmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 148.

⁷⁶ Glenn, 37.

⁷⁷ See Gardner, 145.

⁷⁸ See Dominic Manganiello, *T. S. Eliot and Dante* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1989), 102.

⁷⁹ Baillie and Hugh Martin, eds., *Revelation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937), 71. See Barth, *The Word of God*, 54.

⁸⁰ For the point on “the wisdom of old men” including that of advocates of mysticism, I am indebted to Martin Hägglund, from a talk at Oxford University, October 2012.

⁸¹ Barth, *The Word of God*, 203–4.

⁸² A. David Moody, *Thomas Stearns Eliot, Poet* (1979; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), 206.

⁸³ Murray, 114–15.

⁸⁴ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 249.

⁸⁵ Moody, 195. Moody's point is a bit problematic in relation to Catholicism, as it begs a definition of "united with the divine." Catholic theologians and mystics differ on what "mystical union" really means, and the conditions under which it might be possible.

⁸⁶ Barth, *The Word of God*, 89.