

# Absolute Music and the Death of Desire: Beethoven, Schopenhauer, Wagner and Eliot's *Four Quartets*

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*The influence of Beethoven on Eliot's Four Quartets is mediated by Wagner and Schopenhauer and relates fundamentally to the philosopher's understanding of instrumental music as expressing a universalised and abstract emotion. Schopenhauer's aesthetics are intimately connected with Wagner's treatment of the idea of absolute music—a discussion which begins in his early prose writings and culminates in his essay "Beethoven" (1870). At the origin of Wagner's thinking about absolute music is a striking metaphor: that of Beethoven as Columbus, exploring the sea of absolute music. This metaphor can be found at the heart of Four Quartets, powerfully connecting Eliot's poem with Beethovenian music and with a Schopenhauerian aesthetics that understands this music as inhabiting a realm beyond human affect and desire.*

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Richard Wagner's influence on *The Waste Land* is well known and critics point to T.S. Eliot's 1922 poem as Eliot's primary if not only Wagnerian work. Yet Wagner is also found at the very heart of *Four Quartets*, albeit in the company of his own musical and philosophical mentor, Arthur Schopenhauer. Wagner's relationship with the philosopher is complex, as is Eliot's with Wagner himself. But a clear meeting point for these three figures is found in the discourse of absolute music. An important text within this discourse is Wagner's 1870 "Beethoven" essay, written to commemorate the centenary of the composer's birth. This is Wagner's longest exposition of the idea of absolute music and the

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“central document of his reception of Schopenhauer” (Dahlhaus 34). In the essay, Wagner considers Beethoven’s music in the light of Schopenhauer’s conception of music as expressing the inner nature of all appearance, the will. The essay treats Beethoven’s symphonies but ultimately turns to the late quartets to explore the interior quality of Beethovenian music. Eliot, as is well known, found in the absolute music of Beethoven’s late quartets a model for his own. Beethoven’s influence on the *Four Quartets* is importantly connected with Wagner’s understanding of absolute music, as first articulated in earlier writings and culminating in the Schopenhauerian argument of Wagner’s 1870 essay.<sup>1</sup>

Despite a lack of specific evidence, it is highly probable that Eliot was familiar with Wagner’s prose writings. Wagner’s 1870 essay is also extensively discussed by Arthur Symons in his essay “Beethoven” in *Studies in Seven Arts* (1906). Explicitly engaging with Wagner’s essay, Symons quotes at length from Wagner and from Schopenhauer’s writings. In addition, Wagner’s essay is also at the root of discussions contained in J.W.N. Sullivan’s book, *Beethoven: His Spiritual Development*, which appeared in London in 1927. In an article on Eliot, Beethoven, and Sullivan, Herbert Howarth points to external and internal evidence that Eliot was acquainted with Sullivan’s study. A year after Sullivan’s book was published it was singled out by J.B. Trend in *The Criterion* as one of the few recent examples of an effective literary approach to music (Howarth 327–28). Wagner’s “Beethoven” is a culminating text in the discourse of absolute music that runs from Schopenhauer to Wagner and this discourse exerts a profound, formative influence on Eliot’s *Four Quartets*.

In *The World as Will and Representation* (*WWR*), published in 1818, Schopenhauer famously suggests the whole of the phenomenal world to be a manifestation of the will. He describes the will as “a blind, irresistible urge,” the “thing-in-itself, the inner content, the essence of the world” (*WWR* 1: 275). This will “objectifies” itself in various grades of being, from the inorganic to the human, each with its corresponding Idea; yet it is one and the same will. With regard to the human individual, Schopenhauer suggests two very different modes of the will’s activity. As operating within the individual and within the spatiotemporal world of the individual, the will perpetuates only a cycle of desire, pain, and suffering. Crucially, however, both aesthetic and ascetic experience liberate us from entrapment *within* the individual will (or will-to-life), enabling instead an apprehension of the universal will (the will as “thing in itself”). So art affords knowledge that is truly exceptional—knowledge of what is eternal and universal. At this point, Schopenhauer suggests his key aesthetic distinction. While the visual arts and literature afford knowledge of the Platonic Ideas within phenomena, music alone bypasses the Ideas to directly express the whole of the will, the will as thing-in-itself.<sup>2</sup> So music stands above all arts, giving “the innermost kernel preceding all form, or the heart of things” (*WWR* 1: 263). Schopenhauer’s extraordinary argument is wholly intuitive and incapable of being logically proven. Given this speculative synthesis, the musical aesthetics he elaborates is one of the best-known dimensions of his philosophy. For Schopenhauer, music

that affords this metaphysical insight is specifically Classical or Romantic, non-programmatic music, without narrative or text, what was termed in the late nineteenth century "absolute music."

Though published in 1818, Schopenhauer's *World as Will* was not widely known till nearly half a century later. Wagner was responsible for bringing about a Schopenhauerian renaissance from the 1860s on. Of course, as the proponent of music drama, Wagner's relation to absolute or instrumental music was problematic. When Wagner first coined the term "absolute music" in 1846 in his "programme" to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, he was largely disparaging. His aesthetic is in fact "riddled with discontinuities" and symptomatic of a "divided judgment" (Dahlhaus 19). Nevertheless, Wagner broadly suggested absolute music to be a lower stage on the way to music drama. In 1854, however, Wagner read *The World as Will* and from this point on, he increasingly embraced Schopenhauer's conception of music as a "noumenal" language above words and phenomena.

Interestingly, 1853–54 were the years Wagner concentrated on rehearsing Beethoven's C-sharp minor quartet (Opus 131). It is possible that from this time on Wagner came to connect Beethoven's late quartets with Schopenhauer's aesthetics. Certainly this link was cemented by the time of the 1870 essay, in which Wagner chose Opus 131 to best illustrate Beethoven's music as expressing the interior reality of the will. In 1870–1, Wagner in fact resumed his study of chamber music, now in an intensive manner, devoting himself almost exclusively to Beethoven's late quartets (Kropfinger 47). Somewhat paradoxically, Wagner's essay itself demonstrates not only the manner in which Schopenhauer's aesthetics is applied to Beethoven, but also to Wagnerian opera. Wagner has now come full circle, arguing that although opera requires both drama and action, it is the music itself that is paramount. Operatic works in which the spectacle of ballet or drama is the main attraction testify only to "the degeneracy of the music" (Wagner, "Beethoven" 81).

Many of these important ideas can be seen to come together in Eliot's *Clark Lectures* of 1926. In Lecture 8 on the nineteenth century, Eliot writes

It is noticeable how often the words "*inconscient*" [unconscious], "*néant*" [nothingness], "*l'absolu*" [absolute] and such philosophical terms from the vocabulary of Schopenhauer and Hartmann, the Valkyrie, and such properties from the dramas of Wagner, recur. Laforgue is the nearest equivalent to the philosophies of Schopenhauer and Hartmann, the philosophy of the unconscious and of annihilation, just as Wagner is the nearest music equivalent to the same philosophies . . . (*Metaphysical Poetry* 215)

In describing between Schopenhauer and Wagner a relation of philosophical and musical equivalence, Eliot draws on Schopenhauer's argument for the denial of the will, an idea centrally taken up by Wagner. In both philosopher and musician, a conception of "annihilation" and self-negation evinces the important influence of Buddhism. Eliot himself nearly became a Buddhist at the time of writing *The Waste Land* and in his poetry we can locate a desire for unknowing, a

desire to escape desire and the condition of personal emotion and suffering. For Eliot, Schopenhauer's aesthetics and metaphysics articulate a means to escape individual existence. Liberation from the will is achieved through compassion and ascetic renunciation, but also through art and particularly music.

By making music an expression of the universal will, the idea of absolute music becomes "the idea that music is a revelation of the absolute, specifically because it "dissolves itself from the sensual, and finally even from the affective sphere" (Dahlhaus 17). Absolute music, in other words, articulates a condition of being prior to or beyond the human and material. Conceived this way, music becomes a kind of world unconscious. As Schopenhauer writes, concepts are the "universals after the thing," but music gives the "universals before the thing" and reality "universals in the thing" (*WWR* 1: 263). When Eliot describes "*l'absolu*" as a Schopenhauerian term manifested as a "property" in Wagner's operas, he seems to point precisely to the absolute music contained *within* Wagnerian opera. For Schopenhauer, as for Wagner, such absolute music expresses the universal will, whose apprehension can ultimately only be a death of the personal.

To understand better the relation between absolute music and emotion, we must look more closely at the way in which Schopenhauer's aesthetics negotiate the individual and universal will. Broadly speaking, Schopenhauer's understanding of aesthetic experience as an escape from the individual will seems to imply a conception of art that excludes emotion.<sup>3</sup> Aesthetic contemplation, for Schopenhauer, is the objective perception of the universal Platonic Ideas instantiated within phenomena (*WWR* 1: 178). On the other hand, Schopenhauer's argument that all emotion is a "modification of the will" (*WWR* 2: 202) could seemingly suggest the inverse—that in expressing the will, music expresses human emotions. Vitally, however, Schopenhauer argues that what music expresses is "not this or that particular and definite pleasure, this or that affliction, pain, sorrow, horror, gaiety . . . but joy, pain, sorrow, horror, gaiety . . . *themselves*, to a certain extent in the abstract, their essential nature . . ." (*WWR* 1: 261). This transformed emotion is something altogether different; it is emotion in its universal or nonhuman essence. Music, Schopenhauer suggests, "floats past us as a paradise familiar and yet eternally remote" because it "reproduces all the emotions of our innermost being, but entirely without reality and remote from its pain" (*WWR* 1: 264). Correspondingly, Schopenhauer's theory of musical reception suggests that although music expresses the (universal) will, music must not act directly upon the (individual) will or the affections. In his 1870 essay, Wagner follows Schopenhauer in suggesting this impersonal universality of music. Comparing the visual artist and the musician, Wagner describes the former as unable to raise himself beyond his individual will, except in the disinterested contemplation of objects; whilst "in the musician's case, the will feels *one* forthwith, above all bounds of individuality" (Wagner, "Beethoven" 5: 72).

In Wagner's centenary essay, Beethoven's C-sharp minor quartet becomes the exemplary instance of music as expressing the will and expressing an emotion beyond the individual human sphere. Wagner describes the lengthy opening

*Adagio* as “surely the saddest thing ever said in notes” and yet “a communing with God in firm belief of the Eternal Goodness” (Wagner, “Beethoven” 97). In the subsequent short *Adagio*, Wagner suggests, Beethoven seems to ponder “how to set about the tune for Life itself to dance to” (97). Then, one glance shows him “the inner essence of the world” and in the *Allegro finale* Beethoven wakes and “strikes the strings into a dance the like whereof the world had never heard. ‘Tis the dance of the whole world itself: wild joy, the wail of pain, love’s transport, utmost bliss, grief, frenzy, riot, suffering . . . and above it the stupendous fiddler who bans and bends it all . . . who leads it . . . to the brink of the abyss” [Goethe’s *Faust*] (97–8). It is significant that Wagner at this point relates Opus 131 to *Faust*, the very text that inspired his 1846 programme to Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony in which he coins the term “absolute music.” Now, explicitly drawing on Schopenhauer, Wagner writes of the “inner essence of the world” as this Faustian dance of universal emotions. It is the will itself, embodying that feeling which, purged from ordinary individual existence, appears as the “dance of the whole world itself.”

In “Beethoven,” Wagner’s powerful description of the absolute music of Opus 131 suggests an emotion not only universal, but at times evading human classification. The opening *Adagio* is the saddest thing ever said in notes, yet displays a firm belief in Eternal Goodness. Symons too, in his essay on Beethoven, finds in the last quartets the disappearance of form as limit; a new harmony results that is “at once joy and pain” (216). Symons describes the musician as “the one impersonal artist, who, having lived through joy and sorrow, has both in his hands; can use them like the right hand and the left” (200). The rhythm of Beethoven’s music, Symons writes, “extends beyond mortal joy and mortal sorrow” (204). In his chapter, “The Last Quartets,” Sullivan also discusses Wagner’s 1870 essay. Sullivan suggests Wagner’s interpretation of the C-sharp minor quartet to be erroneous, yet makes the very same point. What is communicated to us in the first movement of Opus 131, Sullivan observes, “has no more to do with melancholy than it has with joy” (225). Sullivan however goes on to refer more favorably to Wagner’s essay. Noting that Beethoven himself thought Opus 131 to be the greatest of his quartets, Sullivan describes the opening fugue as “the most superhuman piece of music that Beethoven has ever written,” having “that serenity which, as Wagner said . . . passes beyond beauty.” (235) Wagner, Symons, and Sullivan all find in Beethoven’s late string quartets that impersonal or infinite emotion envisaged by Schopenhauer; an emotion removed from sentiment and from the material conditions of its existence.

Something of this musical trajectory is reflected in Eliot’s motives in writing *Four Quartets*. In a 1931 letter to Stephen Spender, Eliot remarks of Beethoven’s A-minor quartet (opus 132):

I find it quite inexhaustible to study. There is some sort of heavenly or at least more than human gaiety about some of his later things which one imagines might come to oneself as the fruit of reconciliation and relief after immense suffering. I should like to get something of that into verse before I die. (Qtd. in Fuller 139)

Eliot's desire to "get something of that," that more-than-human gaiety, into verse forms the core of his poetic explorations in *Four Quartets*. Locating Schopenhauer's musical aesthetics at the heart of Eliot's project, we may read *Four Quartets* as exploring absolute music as defined by the philosopher and applied by Wagner to the music of Beethoven.

What Eliot seeks is a new aesthetics of impersonality, to be found in an exaltation to the universal through music. In "East Coker," Eliot reflects on the potentialities of words and music and on those who have gone before him in these artistic explorations.

... Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt  
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure  
.....  
... 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 hope  
to emulate . . . (V: 4–17)

In his article "Eliot, Beethoven and J.W.N. Sullivan," Howarth notes the word "submission" as one of Sullivan's key phrases heard in *Four Quartets* (328). The phrase is taken from Beethoven's journal, where the composer describes his submission to fate and to his spiritual journey. Howarth's brief observation fails to take into account however precisely what is conquered through "strength and submission." This is the conquest of human affections—"undisciplined squads of emotion." For Eliot too, whatever form this conquest might take, it is clear that it is at the heart of Eliot's poetic "venture" in the *Quartets*. Significantly, it is at this very point that we seem to hear an echo of Wagner's first use of the term "absolute music" in his program to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Leading up to Beethoven's introduction of the chorus in the final movement, Wagner writes of the instrumental recitative: "Already almost breaking the bounds of absolute music, it stems the tumult of the other instruments with its virile eloquence, pressing toward decision, and passes at last into a song-like theme" (qtd. in Dahlhaus 18). Ascribing "endless and imprecise expressiveness" to instrumental music, the "decision" Wagner describes is the transition from "imprecise" instrumental music to "precise" vocal music (qtd. in Dahlhaus 18). As Dahlhaus notes, the striking gap between Wagner's view of absolute music as evolving towards music drama and his understanding of instrumental music as an "intimation of the infinite" remains unmitigated. Yet it is this paradoxical birth of absolute music in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony that Eliot seems to intimate here in "East Coker." Eliot's description of the "inarticulate," the "general mess of imprecision of feeling" echoes Wagner's very sense of absolute music as embodying "imprecise"

or infinite feeling.<sup>4</sup> For Eliot too, music offers the possible transformation of undisciplined, personal emotion into something approaching the infinite.

In the very next stanza, Eliot again evokes this seminal moment in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, now employing a key Wagnerian metaphor to redefine his poetry in the terms of absolute music.

... As we grow older  
 The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated  
 Of dead and living . . .  
 .....  
 . . . not the lifetime of one man only  
 But of old stones that cannot be deciphered . . .  
 .....  
 Love is most nearly itself  
 When here and now cease to matter.  
 Old men ought to be explorers  
 Here or there does not matter  
 We must be still and still moving  
 Into another intensity  
 For a further union, a deeper communion . . . (V: 23–39)

Eliot's injunction—old men ought to be explorers—is the second of Sullivan's phrases identified by Howarth, who reads the line as an endorsement and extension of the idea of artistic exploration (Howarth 328–29). Again, Howarth's reading is brief and does not trace the context or provenance of Sullivan's metaphor. Sullivan, however, suggests Beethoven's late quartets to explore “new regions of consciousness” (220), relating this exploration back to the Ninth Symphony in which he locates “an emergence in Beethoven of a new kind of awareness” (221). In other words, Sullivan is himself drawing on Wagner's conception of absolute music as first defined in his program to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. In fact, Sullivan's very use of the term “explorer” derives from Wagner's well-known description of Beethoven as Columbus<sup>3/4</sup>a metaphor Wagner employs precisely to describe Beethoven's “discovery” of absolute music in the final movement of the Ninth Symphony. The analogy first appears in “The Art-Work of the Future” (1849) where Wagner describes the composer as “the hero who explored the broad and seeming shoreless sea of absolute Music unto its very bounds” (115). In “Opera and Drama,” Wagner again employs this metaphor, writing

The history of Instrumental-music . . . is the history of an artistic error. . . . The error of *Beethoven* was that of Columbus, who merely meant to seek out a new way to the old known land of India, and discovered a new world instead . . . —For us, too, has there been unveiled the exhaustless power of Music, through Beethoven's all-puissant error. (“Opera and Drama” 70–1)

In describing Beethoven's transition from instrumental to vocal music in the Ninth Symphony, Wagner implies that the composer *unwittingly* perfected

absolute music by exhausting its possibilities (Kropfing 120). Wagner's description of Beethoven's discovery of absolute music is strikingly distinctive. So when Sullivan observes that Beethoven, in the late quartets, "has discovered unsuspected islands and even continents" amidst "strange seas of thought" (Sullivan 223), he is clearly echoing Wagner. And when Eliot writes of old men as explorers, he alludes not simply to Beethoven, but also to Wagner's Beethoven, who, in his exploration of absolute music, becomes the embodiment of Schopenhauer's musical aesthetics. In his centenary essay on Beethoven, Wagner again refers to this great artistic error. Immediately following his detailed analysis of the C-sharp minor quartet, Wagner turns to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. He describes Beethoven's tendency to "enlarge the province of his art," citing as evidence of the composer's "sublimest naivety" his "*Ninth Symphony with Chorus*" ("Beethoven" 98). For Wagner, Beethoven's discovery of absolute music in the 1824 symphony reaches its culmination in the late string quartets, which he now sees as expressing the Schopenhauerian the world-essence, the Faustian "dance" of the will as universal or infinite emotion.

Eliot too implicitly draws on this aesthetic, invoking the music of Beethoven to suggest an escape from emotion and individuality; this is not the "lifetime of one man only" but the portrayal of a universalised, abstract love. Love removed from "here and now" seems to articulate Schopenhauer's very conception of the emotion found in music: "not this or that particular and definite . . . joy, pain, sorrow" but instead its "abstract" or "essential" nature (*WWR* 1: 261). It is this love as world-essence that Eliot associates with the music of Beethoven—a love which, outside of the "here and now," becomes the terrain of an exploration in which "here or there does not matter." This is the exploration of a "new intensity," a new aesthetics of absolute music in its expression of the universal will. Significantly, in "East Coker," Eliot follows Wagner in uniting the discoveries of old men with their errors.

. . . the intolerable wrestle

With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter.

It was not (to start again) what one had expected.

What was to be the value of the long looked forward to,

Long hoped for calm, the autumnal serenity

And the wisdom of age? . . .

.....

. . . Do not let me hear

Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly . . . (II: 20–44)

Grappling with words and meanings, Eliot hesitatingly anticipates the "long looked forward to, / Long hoped for calm, the autumnal serenity." Eliot's words seem to echo his own 1931 letter and its Beethoven-inspired project for the *Quartets*—an attempt to capture a "heavenly or at least more than human gaiety," "the fruit of reconciliation and relief after immense suffering" (qtd. in Fuller 139). The conquest of merely human emotion now takes the form of a long

awaited "autumnal serenity." Eliot's description of the "folly" of "old men" alludes once more to Wagner's Columbus metaphor and the origin of absolute music in Beethoven's artistic error. What Beethoven is exploring, in Sullivan's words, is precisely the terrain of the "superhuman" (235), to which Eliot aspires in his letter and here in the *Quartets*. What Eliot, in 1931, had wished to achieve before his death he now recalls as he recalls the men who inspired this journey.

Reading back to "Burnt Norton," we see that Eliot's transfigured love or serenity is connected also with the stilling of desire, again in keeping with Schopenhauer's aesthetics. As will gradually become clear, Eliot equates the dynamics of desire with the movement of the individual will, whilst his portrayal of love suggests the universal will as "thing-in-itself". It is in this way that Eliot's *Quartets* follow Beethoven in their struggle, desiring to get beyond desire through a poetry that aspires to the condition of absolute music. Eliot writes

Words move, music moves  
 Only in time . . .  
 . . . . .  
 . . . Only by the form, the pattern,  
 Can words or music reach  
 The stillness, as a Chinese jar still  
 Moves perpetually in its stillness.  
 Not the stillness of the violin, while the note lasts,  
 Not that only, but the co-existence,  
 Or say that the end precedes the beginning,  
 And the end and the beginning were always there  
 Before the beginning and after the end.  
 And all is always now.  
 . . . . .  
 Desire itself is movement  
 Not in itself desirable;  
 Love is itself unmoving,  
 Only the cause and end of movement,  
 Timeless, and undesiring  
 Except in the aspect of time  
 Caught in the form of limitation  
 Between un-being and being. (V: 1–32)

Eliot begins by describing the movement of words and music in time, but then emphasizes a paradoxical stillness apprehended through aesthetic form or pattern. This stillness is, in part, that of a note played upon an instrument, but also the stillness of an abstract "co-existence" in which causality does not operate<sup>34</sup> for "the end precedes the beginning." Here too, Eliot seems to echo Schopenhauer. As we read in *World as Will*, music is perceived "even without the influence of the knowledge of causality. . . . For the tones make the aesthetic impression as effect, and this without our going back to their causes . . ." (*WWR* 1: 266). In

Schopenhauer's aesthetics, music can suggest the simultaneity of cause and effect that otherwise belongs only to the universal will. For Eliot too, music, in its essential form, expresses the universal, eternal will. So the stillness of a note or musical pattern in its "co-existence" reflects a love that is the "cause and end of movement." In opposition to the movement of desire, by which Eliot transcribes the individual will, love itself is "unmoving," "timeless," and "undesiring." This love suggests instead the universal will, removed from time, space, and causality. Of course, Eliot is keenly aware of the paradoxical status of this will; it is timeless—"Except in the aspect of time / Caught in the form of limitation / Between un-being and being."

That Eliot struggles with the will now as he did twenty years prior is seen here in a likely echo of his own 1916 doctoral thesis. In his dissertation, Eliot describes the will as a "half-object" that "belongs to a place half-way between object and subject" (qtd. in Kertzer 381). Here in "Burnt Norton," what is caught between un-being and being is none other than the will—the transformed love that, expressed or reflected in the absolute music of Beethoven, affords a means to apprehend the absolute and negate the personal.

Eliot's cryptic presentation of the will in his 1916 dissertation also sheds light on what is perhaps the best-known section of *Four Quartets*. For what is half way between object and subject, unbeing and being, is also what is poised between stillness and movement; or what is paradoxically both still and moving. The "dance" at the "still point," I would suggest, is Eliot's image of the absolute, the universal will, as expressed in music. Here in "Burnt Norton," Eliot again brings to the fore the musical explorations of Beethoven. The section opens with a complex allusion: "Garlic and sapphires in the mud / Clot the bedded axle-tree" (II: 1–2). Howarth refers the axle-tree to Sullivan's study, which tells us that Beethoven finished the B-flat Quartet at Gneixendorf: "'The name sounds like the breaking of an axle-tree,' said Beethoven" (Howarth 329). At the same time, Howarth notes, the allusion to Mallarmé's sonnet "*m'introduire dans ton histoire*" suggests that Eliot is superimposing himself on Beethoven and his explorations; the axle tree that is breaking is Beethoven's mind as he explores a new artistic frontier. For Eliot, this exploration is intimately intertwined with Schopenhauer's metaphysics.

... at the still point, there the dance  
is,

.....

... Except for the point, the still point,  
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.  
I can only say, *there* we have been: but I cannot say where.  
And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.  
The inner freedom from the practical desire,  
The release from action and suffering, release from the inner  
And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded

By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving,  
*Erhebung* without motion, concentration  
 Without elimination, both a new world  
 And the old made explicit, understood  
 In the completion of its partial ecstasy,  
 The resolution of its partial horror. (II: 1–32)

Eliot's words implicitly chart a Schopenhauerian struggle toward freedom from "desire," "action," "suffering," and "compulsion" (Virkar-Yates, "*Erhebung*, Schopenhauer" 126). What is envisaged here is freedom from willing and from the endless cycle of pain and suffering brought by the will-to-life. Liberation from this will, in Eliot as in Schopenhauer, brings liberation from the spatiotemporal conditions within which the will operates. At the still point is the dance, but this place or condition of being is neither in space nor time: for we "cannot say where" and "cannot say, how long." Instead, this is an apprehension of a "grace of sense, a white light still and moving." This paradoxical and elusive image intimates that half-object that is neither object nor subject; it is the dance of the universal will. As such, it is the same will that Eliot transcribes in his portrayal of love as the "cause and end of movement." Here in "Burnt Norton," Eliot's explicit reference to the exaltation ("*Erhebung*") of Schopenhauer's sublime reiterates this movement to that which is beyond time, space, and individuality (Virkar-Yates, "*Erhebung*, Schopenhauer" 126–7). According to Schopenhauer, the sublime is experienced when the object that invites contemplation bears a hostile relation to the will. In this case, we must struggle to elevate ourselves above the individual will—*Erhebung*—and by so doing, come into contact with the universal will itself. In other words, Schopenhauer's sublime predicates a detachment from the individual will that mirrors that impersonality of absolute music to which Eliot's *Quartets* aspire. "*Erhebung* without motion" is an exaltation not in ordinary movement and not in the sphere of the desiring will; it is instead an exaltation to the universal will as "thing-in-itself."

Interestingly, although Schopenhauer himself does not speak of music in terms of the sublime, Wagner's 1870 essay applies his sublime aesthetics to the discourse of absolute music. Wagner too implicitly draws on Schopenhauer's conception of exaltation when he describes the activity of the will which can "lift itself" through contemplation or music to what is "above all bounds of individuality" (Wagner, "Beethoven" 72). Eliot's application of the sublime similarly moves between its visual and musical inheritance in an image that speaks to both: the dance. In the preceding stanza, Eliot's allusion to Mallarmé signals the symbolist inheritance embedded in this key image; for Mallarmé famously draws on Hegel to describe the dance as pure symbol, "the material appearance of Idea" (Virkar-Yates, "*Erhebung*, Schopenhauer" 127). Hegel's conception of the "exaltation" from the material to the spiritual idea in fact underlies Schopenhauer's dialectic of the sublime. Notably, from the 1850s on, it is the discourse of absolute music that is understood as pure art, a realization of the "material appearance of the idea"

(Dahlhaus 16). As Dahlhaus explains, this is the sense of absolute music as pure structure, but from the 1860s onward, this formalist emphasis is combined with the metaphysical component of the idea which reappears in the Schopenhauerian renaissance brought about by Wagner. What stands out is the idea that music can appear as an image of the absolute (Dahlhaus 16). For Wagner, Beethoven's C-sharp minor quartet embodies "the dance of the whole world." In Eliot's *Four Quartets* too, the "dance" similarly signifies both the universal will and the absolute music that expresses this will. Effectively drawing on symbolist and musical aesthetics, Eliot offers us an image of the absolute, the will as "thing-in-itself."

In his 1926 lectures, as we have seen, Eliot mentions the words "*inconscient*," "*néant*," and "*l'absolu*" as terms used by Jules Laforgue and borrowed from Schopenhauer and von Hartmann, adding that they find their musical equivalent in Wagner (*Metaphysical Poetry* 125). Through the discourse of absolute music developed by Schopenhauer and Wagner, Eliot likewise finds in Beethoven a sublime transcendence that is both an exaltation to the "more than human" and a dissolution of the personal.

But if, above all, it is the death of desire Eliot seeks, there is yet another way to achieve this death. For in parallel with the detachment from the self suggested through absolute music, the *Quartets* also negotiate another profoundly Schopenhauerian theme: the final denial of the will-to-live. For Wagner too, this is the primary lesson learned from his first reading of the *World as Will*. In a letter to Lizst written in 1854, Wagner describes himself as "exclusively preoccupied" with Schopenhauer, in particular his "principal idea, the final denial of the will to live . . . the sincere and heartfelt yearning for death: total unconsciousness, complete annihilation, the end of all dreams—the only ultimate redemption!" (Wagner, *Selected Letters* 323–24) In "Burnt Norton," Eliot writes

Descend lower, descend only  
 Into the world of perpetual solitude,  
 World not world, but that which is not world,  
 Internal darkness, deprivation  
 And destitution of all property,  
 Desiccation of the world of sense  
 Evacuation of the world of fancy,  
 Inoperancy of the world of spirit;  
 This is the one way, and the other  
 Is the same, not in movement  
 But abstention from movement; while the world moves  
 In appetency, on its metallated ways  
 Of time past and time future. (III: 25–37)

Darkness, deprivation, destitution, desiccation, evacuation, inoperancy—Eliot's words chart the territory of the will's denial. This is "one way," which, like the "other" is "not in movement." As Eliot tells us in "Burnt Norton," "desire itself is movement" and here too "movement" and "appetency" are

conjoined. In the *Quartets*, desire or movement repeatedly transcribes Schopenhauer's will-to-live. The stilling or denial of this will through death-like renunciation brings an "annihilation" of the self that is also a merging with the universal. According to Schopenhauer, death brings only the destruction of the individual as phenomenon; on dying the individual is merged again with the universal, eternal will. For Eliot, the portrayal of this universal will must yet again end in paradoxes and tautologies; for this is the inhabiting of a place or condition of being not in space or time—a "world not world," that half-object caught between being and un-being. To attain to an apprehension of the universal will is to leave the phenomenal world of movement and action, desire and suffering. This negation of world and self can be achieved in two ways. We may "descend lower" to a world not world, through a movement that is no movement, renouncing joy, sorrow, and desire. Or we may seek, through art or music, an exaltation "without motion" to an apprehension of the absolute. Descent or elevation, darkness or light—it is the death of desire that Eliot seeks, and both the one way and the other are therefore the same. "So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the / dancing" (III: 28). In "Little Gidding," this paradoxical reconciliation returns in Eliot's image of the sea.

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  
 When the last of earth left to discover  
 Is that which was the beginning.  
 At the source of the longest river  
 The voice of the hidden waterfall

.....  
 . . . heard, half-heard, in the stillness  
 Between two waves of the sea. (V: 25–38)

At the close of *Four Quartets*, Eliot returns to the exploration with which he began. Old men ought to be explorers and Eliot's concluding stanzas recall yet again Beethoven as Columbus, exploring the sea of absolute music unto its very bounds. When Wagner first wields his Columbus metaphor in *The Art-work of the Future*, he develops at some length the image of the sea for the nature of musical art (110–31). What the sea expresses is "absolute harmony," the essence of musical art (Dahlhaus 23). For Eliot too, the image of the sea suggests a final reconciliation or harmony. If the dance at "the still point of the turning world" is "a white light still and moving," it is this paradoxical reality that is echoed in the music heard or half-heard, "in the stillness / Between two waves of the sea." In the sea of absolute music is reflected the music of the universal will, paradoxically still and yet moving in a reality that is beyond space, time, and the individual. In this absolute harmony, this sublimation of the individual in the universal, Eliot achieves his desired death, and the end of desire.

## Notes

1. I also briefly discuss Eliot's *Four Quartets* in relation to Wagner's "Beethoven" essay in Virkar-Yates, "'Into our first world': Schopenhauer, Wagner and the Music of *Four Quartets*." This chapter specifically examines Wagner's development of Schopenhauer's alternative worlds of appearance and music and its relation to Eliot's exploration of the visual and aural in his poem.
2. There is some contention surrounding the Platonic Ideas in Schopenhauer's aesthetics, but these are broadly understood as having an intermediary status between the will and phenomena; see Magee 148.
3. For a discussion of this point and of a Schopenhauerian account of emotion in art as dissociated emotion, see Young 114–23. I also discuss the influence of Schopenhauer on Eliot's conception of impersonal emotion in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in Virkar-Yates, "An objective chemistry: what T. S. Eliot borrowed from Schopenhauer."
4. Wagner's meaning is made clearer in *A Pilgrimage to Beethoven* (1840) which anticipates much of his later commentary on the composer. Wagner writes, "Let us set the wild, unfettered elemental feelings, represented by the instruments, in contact with the clear and definite emotion of the human heart, as represented by the voice of man . . . the human heart itself, taking up into it those primordial feelings, will be immeasurably reinforced and widened . . . transformed thereby to godlike consciousness" (42). See also Kropfingher 55.

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