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# ELIOT, BEETHOVEN, AND J. W. N. SULLIVAN

HERBERT HOWARTH

ELIOT, who is fond of detective stories, has planted clues for his biographers in almost every one of his critical articles and lectures. A capital clue to the origins of *Four Quartets* was rescued by the late F. O. Matthiessen from an unpublished lecture given by the poet at New Haven in the winter of 1933. It showed that at that time he was concerned with the idea of writing poetry that would be transparent and thus beyond poetry, and that he had in mind as his model Beethoven's late quartets where the music is beyond music. At a date only a little later than the New Haven statement, Stephen Spender wrote the chapter of *The Destructive Element* in which he compares *Ash Wednesday* with Beethoven's *A Minor Quartet Opus 132*. Stanley Edgar Hyman subsequently pointed out confusions in Spender's study, but suggested that *Four Quartets* clearly asked by their five-movement structure to be correlated with the *A Minor Quartet*.

A comparison between the five movements of the Beethoven masterpiece and the five sections into which each of Eliot's quartets is divided is rewarding. Beethoven's first movement is an allegro; his second a scherzo with a markedly contrasting trio; the third a slow movement of "unearthly beauty," with a contrasting section at a rather quicker, more animated pace; the fourth a very short alla marcia; the fifth an allegro appassionato in rondo design leading to "an extended coda, breathless, brilliant, fully-scored, yet airy." (These quotations are from the H. M. V. program notes available in England in the 1930s.)

In *Burnt Norton*, which appeared in 1936 as the last of the poems dated 1909-1935, Eliot reproduced this formal scheme. In addition he attempted, notably in the first and fifth sections, to find a verbal equivalent for the elusive gusts of the strings by choosing images and rhythms that imply quickness and elusiveness. The allegro of *Burnt Norton* tries to catch music's motion by the use of time and the bird and the echo, the sudden flowering of the lotus, leaves and laughter, and time again. His second section candidly attempts the three-four impetus of a late Beethoven scherzo, and his "trilling wire" image is a grasp at the excited pitch of the music. For the contrasting trio he changes to long lines in his special introspective idiom. By an act of poetic intuition he saw that he could thus adapt Beethoven's contrast to his needs; this was the first of several such acts of intuition which occur in the later quartets and make all four fascinating to the student of poetic form. The slow movement opens like Beethoven's with an exploration, in slow lines, of a place of disaffection; then it proceeds to a second sec-

tion which does not quicken with new life as Beethoven's does, but instead goes deeper and slower "into the world of perpetual solitude." For Beethoven's *alla marcia*, Eliot writes a short rhyming lyric, pivoting on two questions and so leading—"attacca subito"—to the last movement which, after discussing the differences between words and music, tentatively answers the questions by saying that "the detail of the pattern is movement" and that love is the cause and the end of movement.

The other quartets retain this scheme; they have the same sections in the same order, and within the sections the equivalent subsections. But there are certain changes. There is a gradual extension of thought through the four quartets. It seems that the thought progresses through the struggle with the form, and that the form is capable of sudden successful modification when the thought moves.

Perhaps I should state here that these notes are not an attempt to interpret the *Four Quartets* (although I hope they may provide material relevant to an interpretation), nor can they take account of the whole range of allusions. They are concerned mainly with Eliot's choice of form—the reasons that influenced it, and the consequences of it. This being said, I would like to face two preliminary questions: Why, of the late Beethoven quartets, did Eliot choose Opus 132 as his model? And why did he retain it for four poems? He might have attempted to write an equivalent for each of the late Beethoven quartets in turn, and it is possible to imagine that in 1933 he played with that idea; but in the end he preferred to labor at Opus 132, marvelously exploiting its resources.

My supposition is that Eliot's attention was compelled to the *A Minor Quartet* by the description which Beethoven wrote above the slow movement: "Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit . . ." On the occasion of the Braille Centenary Eliot gave, as an act of generosity, an informal talk before a small audience at the National Book League in London. A blind reader recited from *The Rock*. Eliot commented that for two or three years preceding the composition of that pageant he had gone through a barren and difficult period; there had been moments when he doubted whether he had any more poetry to write. The London churches then asked him to undertake *The Rock* and he responded, composing the choruses by an act of the will. The result was (I *think* he meant after that work, not in it) a release of his blocked poetical powers. In fact we know that a rich phase opened after *The Rock*; the second half of his creative life opened and yielded all his full-length plays and the *Quartets*.

Eliot did not touch in that talk on the sources of his new creative power. Personally I feel, as Matthiessen evidently felt, that his return to America after eighteen years' absence had radical effects; perhaps

the metaphorical family reunion that began with the Harvard lectures of 1932-33 played a double role in the crisis and the emergence from crisis, first completing the dislocation of his forces, then providing the sustenance out of which they were to be reorganized. The consideration of that process is not the purpose of these notes. In relation to the form of *Four Quartets* the point is that Eliot felt from 1933, or a little later, that he had passed through severe difficulties, through a state like illness, that demanded a confrontation with himself at the profoundest level, and desired to write poetry that recorded and examined and offered an understanding of the experience. Such poetry would be his sacred song of thanks to the Godhead for recovery. As he reflected on Beethoven's final style, to which he had been drawn by the theory that an artistic medium ultimately becomes transparent in the hands of a master, Eliot realized that he must attempt that transparency on the model of the *A Minor Quartet*, for that was also the highest example of a hymn of thanks for safe passage through the dark. If he wrote to that pattern, the form would show that he was writing a sacred song.

*Burnt Norton* was only a half success. Eliot diminished the impact of the poem by the procedure which he hoped would convey the aural effect of music, the dependence on rhythms and imagery meant to suggest the *elusive*. The scherzo-lyric of the second section is in its way a triumph of equivalence for the Beethoven scherzo, but even that is too insubstantial to be the most satisfactory poetry. The opening movement is much too elusive; and so is the close of the last, though the twenty-two lines that begin "Words move, music moves" overcome the difficulties and take on force as they report the poet's experience with words. How does he succeed with the central and formally most significant slow movement? He writes a convincing personal waste-land version of the state of illness with which Beethoven is initially concerned, but he does not go on to attempt a version of the contrasting section which the composer marked "Neue Kraft fuehlend." I would guess that the reason for this omission is that in 1935, even though beginning to use his new strength, he did not yet feel sufficiently sure of it to dare to speak of it or write as its interpreter; possibly he was not yet wholly, not umbilically, detached from the state of illness.

There is no more exacting critic of his own work than Eliot, and he knew that while he had written a poem fine enough to print he had not solved his problems. That is why he returned to the same pattern, determined to solve them. The success of the renewed experiments can be gauged according to his success in writing the "Neue Kraft fuehlend" section. In *East Coker* there is the first trace of new power realized. Though he tells himself

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope  
 For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love  
 For love would be love of the wrong thing . . .

there is already a trace of the hope and the love in the animating lift of the lines. In *The Dry Salvages* he alters the form of the slow movement because the story of the journey into illness has changed into a study of the transatlantic journey which itself is a symbol of the journey of the soul through life and death; the division into contrasting sections has to be let go in favor of this thematic requirement. In the last quartet, *Little Gidding*, the first section has ceased to be a brooding on illness and has become a statement of adaptation to life; Eliot is sure of himself now, completely confident; and the second section is a full realization of Beethoven's animated andante section, beginning with a promise of such transfiguring that

All shall be well, and  
 All manner of thing shall be well . . .

Perhaps the closest formal reproduction of Beethoven's pattern is in *East Coker*. The first, second, and fifth sections follow the procedure set in *Burnt Norton*, but do it better with a firmer hold. The third section, as we have seen, does not completely represent Beethoven's slow movement, but it does feel in that direction and closes with the famous mystical statement of the contraries which are the key to health. This in turn suggests a function for the alla marcia passage, which in *Burnt Norton* had been only an interposed question; Eliot now makes it a metaphysical lyric imaging the world in terms of sickness, a sickness which can be understood by analogy with the function of an individual's sickness in the Jungian psychology, as the opportunity for salvation.

Five years elapsed between *Burnt Norton* and *East Coker*. It took Eliot that long to advance in his control of the pattern. Then, having controlled it, he was able in the next two quartets to use it with an appearance of superb ease, and to pass to virtuoso modifications of it, which result in work of great technical beauty. In *The Dry Salvages* he drops his trilling-wire scherzo, because it has been leading him into "worn-out" periphrasis, and replaces it with the quasi sestina. To this piece of writing he probably looks with satisfaction when he applies to himself one of his favorite tests: "Have I in any way made useful technical innovations?" Through the six stanzas the six lines rhyme in unchanging order, and the rhyme words are sometimes new and always as if dictated by the sense, so that they become an undertow giving the depth and sea rhythm to the poem that it needs to state its meaning. It is an improvement on the previous scherzi, and it leaves them and the Beethoven shape behind, but it is only possible because

these have been the stepping-stones to it. The earlier management of the trio through long probing introspective lines still operates. In *Little Gidding*, however, Eliot reverses the plan: once more he writes a rhymed lyric to open the section, only now he has squeezed the periphrasis out of it, or at any rate has substituted his own kind of periphrasis for the outworn kind; but for the trio he suddenly builds, by a compelled passionate insight, a tense new formal structure.

Using Canto XV of the *Inferno* as a frame of reference, he describes a meeting with a "compound ghost" (inclusive of Mallarmé, Babbitt, Pound, Whitman, Owen, and his younger self). This ancestor meets him in the empty streets of blitzed London—a land consumed by fire. For Brunetto Latini's foretelling of Dante's future he substitutes a prophecy of Eliot's success, which, inseparable from misunderstanding and approval for the wrong reasons, must be the profoundest source of dissatisfaction to the poet. For this episode Eliot writes lines that look as if they are Dante's terza rima, but in fact they do not rhyme; they are held together by interlocking masculine and feminine endings. This form lends them a higher austerity than the usual imitations of Dante's terza rima can give. It has a dignity outstanding even amid Eliot's dignified poetry; it has an awful dignity, and at the end a bitter dignity (which is actually out of keeping with the reconciliation towards which the *Quartets* are by this stage quickly moving—but nonetheless the lines are supreme). Now if we consider this section in relation to the "trio" of the three preceding quartets, we see, as before, that the astonishingly triumphant development has been made possible by the struggle to meet the demands of the section quartet by quartet; the preceding attempts are the basis from which this makes its upward spring.

The gradual evolving and modifying of the five-movement pattern was a process spread over seven years. Helen Gardner has written that the four quartets were conceived from the outset as a unity. I have never been able to satisfy myself that this was the case. The Faber catalogue which eventually announced the gathering of all four together for the autumn of 1944 certainly says that "The author . . . has always intended them to be published as one volume, and to be judged as a single work." But in 1940 the autumn catalogue which had announced *East Coker* had shown the author as a little less definite in intention: "This is a poem of the same length and in the same form—described by the author as a 'quartet'—as *Burnt Norton*. These two poems, and at least one yet unwritten, are intended to form a kind of sequence." What this blurb fixes is that Eliot was determined, by the time *East Coker* was finished, to persist in the *A Minor* pattern, proper to his theme and proving so challenging technically, and to continue, with the help of it, to explore his quadrilateral of themes: the theme of illness and its values

and the nature of healing; the theme of exploration itself, and of migration, expatriation, and repatriation; the theme of history, arising alike from the study of society's illness and of exploration, and made urgent in *Little Gidding* by the circumstances of the war; and the theme of the artist's struggle with his medium. The last theme is a curious consequence of the struggle to emulate Beethoven. At the beginning of the fifth section of *Burnt Norton*, he had reflected on the difficulties and opportunities of that struggle, contrasting the potentialities of words and music. Thus, as he treated a related problem in the same place in each quartet, he made a series of disquisitions on the mastery of the medium a leading feature of his experiment in mastering the medium.

To master the medium and make it transparent was not an aim of Eliot alone. Among his English friends in Bloomsbury, Roger Fry had long spoken of it. Fry had praised Derain for outsoaring his medium so that the painting was forgotten in the immediacy of the result. Eliot, so closely associated with Bloomsbury, must have been aware of Fry's dicta and perhaps impressed by them. But it is not surprising that, when he consciously formulated his attempt at poetry beyond the medium, he did so in emulation of a musical precedent rather than a precedent from painting. There is imagery from the visual arts in his poems, but it is, I think, slight compared with his references to music. In his earliest verse he wrote preludes and rhapsodies. He alluded to ariettes. He satirized the Chopin cult. In *The Waste Land* he used Wagner as his frame of reference (like so many other writers of the time), leading through a verse from *Tristan*, an imitation of the Rhinemaidens, and evocations of *Parsifal*, to a conflagratory collapse of London recalling *The Dusk of the Gods*. From passages in his prose we know that in his early London days he was an enthusiast for Stravinsky, whose music he defended against skeptical friends at the point of an umbrella. He was a connoisseur of the ballet. When he launched *The Criterion*, he very early appointed J. B. Trend his music critic, and issue by issue Trend contributed papers which make the files of that defunct periodical still valuable reading for the musical amateur. Probably his musical knowledge, at once many-sided and discriminating, was a gift of St. Louis. Dreiser, who arrived in the city in 1892 when Eliot was four years old, has described it as confident and exacting in its musical culture.

I don't know whether or not Eliot usually read books on music and musicians. But there is evidence, external and internal, that he was acquainted with a study of Beethoven which appeared in London in 1927, *Beethoven—His Spiritual Development*, by J. W. N. Sullivan. Sullivan was a largely self-educated Londoner of considerable capacity and passionate convictions. He had been encouraged in his literary work by Middleton Murry, who had linked him with Eliot, Conrad

Aiken, Aldous Huxley, and others in his band of brilliant contributors to *The Athenaeum* between 1919 and 1921. In *Ushant* Aiken has told how he was present at a four-cornered luncheon in the early 1920s with Huxley, Sullivan, and Eliot. When J. B. Trend wrote in *The Criterion* for March 1928 on appropriate and inappropriate literary approaches to music, he singled out Sullivan's *Beethoven* as one of the few recent instances of a really useful study. Eliot was an editor who conscientiously read all the contributions to his periodical; the periodical and his own writings alike show, again and again, the impact of previous contributions on his thought; to analyze *The Criterion* is to be impressed by the dynamic developments that can occur when a poet-editor takes his editorial duties seriously. I believe that either Eliot had looked through Sullivan's book already, out of an interest in both the man and his subject, and was confirmed in a positive response to it by Trend's remarks; or that Trend's remarks sent him to the book. It is striking that, when Spender writes about Eliot and Beethoven in *The Destructive Element*, he quotes from Sullivan to characterize the late music. I am inclined to speculate that Eliot himself had mentioned Sullivan to Spender. Perhaps at a *Criterion* lunch or a Bloomsbury-set encounter Eliot told Spender that he was desirous of creating poetry of the late-Beethoven transparency and referred him to Sullivan's work of interpretation. Whereupon Spender, wrongly thinking that Eliot had already attempted an equivalent to Beethoven, sat down and read Sullivan and forcibly correlated what he found with *Ash Wednesday*.

Eliot was actually describing something still fermenting. He was turning over and over in his mind the story of Beethoven's last period as Sullivan told it. Some of Sullivan's phrases can be heard in *Four Quartets*. Here is a list:

(1) Sullivan quotes from Beethoven's journal: "Submission, absolute submission to your fate . . . O hard struggle! Turn everything which remains to be done to planning the long journey." This spiritual journey of Beethoven gives Eliot one of his themes—which he pursues both in the terminology of a journey into the dark and through a study of his ancestors' journey to America and his own journey back to Europe, which become symbols of the inner migration. Eliot thinks of Beethoven's "submission," which made the journey possible for the composer, in the lines in *East Coker*:

. . . 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 . . .

(2) Three times Sullivan refers to "Beethoven the explorer." In the last section of *East Coker* Eliot says "Old men ought to be ex-

plorers." We can read this line as an endorsement and extension of Sullivan's words, and inflect it "Old men *ought* to be explorers."

(3) Sullivan has a quick, poignant discussion of Beethoven's intense but mishandled affection for his nephew. Eliot writes:

Do not let me hear  
Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly . . .

(4) The *East Coker* lyric imaging Christ as the wounded surgeon may have grown from reflections on the letter written by Beethoven's physician, quoted by Sullivan, pp. 257-258: ". . . when I promised him alleviation of his suffering with the coming of the vitalizing weather of spring he answered with a smile, 'My day's work is finished. If there were a physician could help me his name should be called Wonderful.' This pathetic allusion to Handel's 'Messiah' touched me deeply . . ."

(5) Sullivan tells how Beethoven finished the Bb quartet Opus 135 at Gneixendorf: "'the name sounds like the breaking of an axle-tree,' said Beethoven." The memory of this vivid simile filtered into the *Burnt Norton* scherzo:

Garlic and sapphires in the mud  
Clot the bedded axle-tree.

Matthiessen, at the suggestion of John L. Sweeney, related these lines to Mallarmé's "tonnerre et rubis aux moyeux," but was not, I think, able to show their relevance to the poem. If we hear the verse as a late Beethoven scherzo, and realize that the axle-tree that is breaking is Beethoven's mind, and that accordingly it carries suggestions of the danger to the mind of the artist exploring a frontier, then it takes on significance. Also, the point of the borrowing from Mallarmé, with which the image is fused, grows clear; it is a borrowing from "M'introduire dans ton histoire," and what Eliot is doing is making a montage, superimposing himself on Beethoven's history, as he is fully aware.

(6) The first movement ends, says Sullivan, "as only Beethoven would end with what sounds like a startling and celestial trumpet call." Eliot does not attempt to equal this effect in *Burnt Norton*, but in *East Coker* there is a hint of it, and in *The Dry Salvages* he superbly transposes it with

Clangs  
The bell.

Professor Grover Smith has surmised, in his recent book on Eliot, that the triple "Resign" in *Coriolan* may be a reminiscence of the heart-beat figure in Beethoven's *Coriolan* overture.<sup>1</sup> If that is so, Eliot had

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper I am writing without comment on the difficult question of analogies between musical and poetic idiom. This much is clear, however: that

already experimented with equivalents for the kind of dramatic musical stroke that he now in *The Dry Salvages* is able to incorporate perfectly into his own material. His incomplete *Coriolan* might be analyzed as a first encounter with Beethoven.

(7) Sullivan tells how Beethoven copies "mystical sentences from eastern literature." Eliot also is fond of Eastern mystical literature; he might in any case have written his passage on Krishna and Arjuna in *The Dry Salvages*, but it is just possible that his natural tendency was prompted and sanctioned by Sullivan's reference.

(8) Eliot's theme of illness and suffering and sterile hiatus in creation is of course implicit in the whole Beethoven biography. But there is one passage that sounds particularly relevant. Writing of the *Große Fuge* "in which the apparently opposing elements of life are seen as necessary and no longer in opposition," Sullivan goes on: "Beethoven had come to realize that his creative energy, which he at one time opposed to his destiny, in reality owed its very life to that destiny. It is not merely that he believed that the price was worth paying; he came to see it as necessary that a price should be paid. To be willing to suffer in order to create is one thing; to realize that one's creation necessitates one's suffering, that suffering is one of the greatest of God's gifts, is almost to reach a mystical solution of the problem of evil . . ." From this point Eliot starts his own exploration of illness and suffering; in the course of it he makes his own mystical reconciliation of opposites; and in the closing lines of the whole sequence he offers

A condition of complete simplicity  
(Costing not less than everything) . . .

(9) There is one further connection of considerable thematic importance. Sullivan describes Beethoven's special lack of the "language mentality": "It is not only that he was untrained and clumsy in the use of language; his most important states of consciousness, what he would have called his 'thoughts,' were not of the kind that can be expressed in language." Perhaps this prompts Eliot's inquiry, pressed through each of the quartets, into the difference between words and music, the precarious availability of words for the expression of difficult thoughts, the poet's struggle "trying to learn to use words."

Did Eliot succeed in writing poetry beyond poetry? Not in *Four Quartets*. He wrote a searching, moving sequence on the subject of trying to do so. Sometimes there are lines and even passages of several lines that make statements so intently and effectively that they are

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the exceptional, dramatic strokes in music—which are already, in a sense, non-musical, are easier for a poet to equate than music's normal effects, which depend so much on flow and interflow. A poet can more easily write, and a reader can more easily pick up, equivalents for the strikingly exceptional.

almost beyond poetry, but then the voice alters—yielding poetry that is often outstandingly beautiful but that is, for that reason, not what Eliot was seeking. Instances of this evident poetry are “The salt is on the briar rose,” and the celebrated image of the train halted in the subway tunnel, or

Out at sea the dawn wind  
Wrinkles and slides.

But though the *Quartets* did not produce the result for which Eliot was working, they showed him, in the contest with the material, more about the result than he had known before. He was then able to proceed to it in *The Cocktail Party* and *The Confidential Clerk*.

He had told himself that the result was necessary in the highest interests of writing at the supreme level where truth burns away ornament. But the impulsion to it was finally provided by a strictly practical need. For thirty years he had been speculating on how to make poetry which would cross the boards of the theater and be received without prejudice by the large, regular theater audience. He had worked for the style of *Four Quartets* with incomplete success; but writing for the stage afterwards, and challenging himself to find a style not so much beyond poetry as beyond prejudice, he found himself capable of something new. Exercised by Beethoven and Sullivan, he was sufficiently master of words to obtain the half-colloquial rhythms, the natural idiom and accentuations, and the distillation of flavor and feeling from them, that carry the late popular plays.

The final dramatic style is certainly transparent. Perhaps one could quibble at the description of it as “beyond poetry.” It is not supra-poetry. Detractors might call it infra-poetry. It is really para-poetry. That means, it is on the same level as what is commonly called in our tradition poetry, but apart from it, and kept distinct from it to avoid confusion.

Towards the end of *The Cocktail Party* there is a moment when Eliot invites us to see the proof of his success. Harcourt-Reilly asks: “Do you mind if I quote poetry?” Edward and Lavinia are polite enough, and cowed enough, to encourage him, and he quotes—since Eliot, whose reading of poetry began, after Omar, with Shelley, is returning to Shelley at the last—a magnificent archetypal passage from *Prometheus Unbound*. It is a crucial moment of the play and completely serious, and thus Shelley is apt for it; but I fancy that the humorist in Eliot is also active in the formulation of it, and so is the technical critic. For he wants us to note that traditional poetry sounds unmistakably different from the new poetry, the transparent medium, that he has invented after a lifetime of discipline.

The surprise in the result is that, while Beethoven’s journey took him beyond the common ear, Eliot’s immersion of himself in Beethoven

and his struggle to emulate Beethoven ultimately produced poetry to which the common ear has opened. Eliot probably regards this as right. Though he is the most aloof of men, his inner self is fired by socioreligious convictions, and such convictions require the mending of the channels of communication between the poet and the public. It is part of the characteristic Eliot paradox that he took the most private way in company with the most individual genius to this collective end. And, if the end differentiates him from the musical ancestor, Beethoven, it also separates him from a literary forebear, Mallarmé. Mallarmé honored the word, but Eliot, while respecting Mallarmé so much, honors what the word signifies, and is intent that the word be forgotten in favor of its significance.

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