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THOMAS R. REES

## *The Orchestration of Meaning in T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets*

MANY CRITICS and students have come dangerously close to subscribing to the tenuous proposition that a nearly exact formal analogy exists between the structure of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* and that of Beethoven's late string quartets. Despite the obvious musicality of Eliot's poem and the immense value of musicological studies of its structure, I intend to prove that attempts to establish a strict correlation between the quartets and specific musical compositions, without considering other musical influences, can lead to confusing and inaccurate oversimplifications. I would also like to identify and assess some of the more important musical as well as literary and philosophical influences on the structure of the quartets, and to demonstrate Eliot's skill in using a variety of musical and literary devices to bring out his meanings.

Certain commentators, whose contributions to the study of the quartets have been otherwise sound and perceptive, have gone so far as to identify definite string quartets as models for Eliot's poem. Herbert Howarth traces the origin of the *Four Quartets* to one of Eliot's Yale lectures in 1933, in which Eliot expressed his concern with "the idea of writing poetry that would be beyond poetry, and that he had

in mind as his model Beethoven's late quartets where the music is beyond music." Howarth identifies Eliot's model here as Beethoven's A Minor Quartet, Opus 132.<sup>1</sup> The poet's interest in Beethoven was evidently aroused by reading J. W. N. Sullivan's *Beethoven—His Spiritual Development* (1927). In this work Sullivan describes the musician's feelings as he composes the quartet in A minor: Beethoven is grateful to his physician for alleviating his suffering with the coming of spring (hence Eliot's symbolic image of Christ as the wounded surgeon). Sullivan also refers to Beethoven as "the explorer" (hence Eliot's "Old men ought to be explorers."). Beethoven's submission to fate, his interest in oriental literature, his self-doubts over his creative abilities, his artistic struggles with his medium—all of these things, according to Howarth, are treated thematically in Eliot's poem.<sup>2</sup>

Harvey Gross perceives a number of formal similarities between the *Four Quartets* and Beethoven's C♯ Minor Quartet, Opus 131, because of that composition's "great variety in mood and technical effect, and because its vast musical scheme offers a rich context of contrasting feeling." Both Eliot's poem and Beethoven's quartet, Gross asserts, are composed in cyclical form with a "seminal motto"; they "develop organically out of a single controlling idea"; man, who is estranged both from himself and from society, "finds reconcilia-

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tion in God; despair becomes the way to joy; time and history become ways leading out of time and beyond history."<sup>3</sup>

Certain other critics have been more general in identifying the musical models for Eliot's poem. Hugh Kenner says that Eliot is "reported to have said that he was paying attention chiefly to Bartok's quartets Nos. 2-6 . . .,"<sup>4</sup> while Dorothy E. Rambo relies on the fact that the "central experience" dominating each of Beethoven's quartets corresponds to Eliot's "still point" or "Logos," which represents "an all powerful force which permeates the texture" of the poem.<sup>5</sup> D. Bosley Brotman, on the other hand, notes that each of Eliot's quartets has "the basic structure" of a string quartet providing a "large framework" for the systematic development of the poet's ideas.<sup>6</sup>

Each of these critics, despite a slight tendency toward overgeneralization, has made some extremely valuable contributions to our understanding of the musico-logical format of the *Four Quartets*. Nor can it be denied that the composition of the quartets has been influenced by a variety of musical forms.

Indeed, from the time of his earliest compositions Eliot has continually exploited the musical idiom as a source of formal organization in his verse. In "Portrait of a Lady" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the unity and progression of images is based on interlocking patterns of repeated words and symbols, which approximate the progression of interweaving motifs in the impressionistic music of Debussy and Ravel. The numerous false starts and broken phrases of Prufrock's dialogue follow an incremental development pattern similar to Chopin's deferred resolutions. The confused and fragmentary development of themes in *The Waste Land*, combined with the use of recurrent patterns in the dominant image-groups, reflect the fused influences of Stravinski and the Wagnerian leitmotif. Finally, in the composition of the *Four Quartets*, Eliot molds his deepest religious feelings into a broader format for thematic organization suggested by the sonata-allegro form of Beethoven's string quartets.

It is a format ideally suited to the orderly and sustained development of contrasting themes.

An examination of the standard sonata-allegro form might help us to understand more clearly the analogy existing between the form of the *Four Quartets* and that of a musical quartet. In the first movement of a conventional quartet there are three principal sections: (1) the Exposition Section which introduces the two contrasting themes or subjects; (2) the Development Section in which these two themes are subjected to manifold variations, extensions, inversions, and counterpointing; and (3) the Recapitulation Section where the original themes are restated in final form, having been resolved and transfigured in the Development Section. This fruitful form also constitutes the structural base for the composition of sonatas, quartets, overtures, concertos, and symphonies.

The basic subject, or thematic idea, of the *Four Quartets* is the poet's search, through mortal time, for eternal reality. In adapting his material to the sonata-allegro form Eliot arranges the subject into two contrasting but related themes—the main theme of eternity versus the counter-theme of temporal mutability. In each of the quartets these themes are introduced, developed, and recapitulated in such a way that the poet's ideas, as he moves closer to his moment of ultimate reality, are expanded in an amplifying pattern from quartet to quartet. The two opposing themes are synthesized in the idea that the poet can perceive eternity only through his experiences in the temporal world.

The themes, in turn, are projected in terms of dominant images which either vary or are reiterated in expanded form from one quartet to the next. The main theme of eternity most often recurs as the still point in the garden in which the poet catches glimmerings of ultimate reality. The subdominant theme of temporal mutability manifests itself in a variety of forms: the joyful village dancers in "East Coker" whose end is death, the eternal confusion of human desires and neurotic preoccupations, the Heraclitan flux in mind and nature.

Although treatments of the two major themes run alternately all the way through the quartets, the specific subjects change from section to section. The moment in the garden, the recurring patterns of earthly and planetary motions, the poet's difficulties with words and music, deaths at sea, journeys by ship and rail—these passing subjects might be considered as sub-themes or incidental themes which support the two main themes. Each subject is a frame enclosing the poet's images and ideas, and as such it forms a solid, recognizable base for the projection of thematic materials.

"Dry Salvages" provides an excellent illustration of how Eliot presents his two related but contrasted themes in the form of dominant images. The river, in symbolizing the mortal time which we feel within ourselves, represents the temporal mutability theme, while the sea around us represents the eternity theme in that it makes us aware of the vast time that stretches before and after us. The two themes are first presented consecutively, then they are developed together as contrasting modes, and finally the sea-theme of eternity asserts its dominance as a preserver and destroyer of mortal life and time.

The formal resemblance of the *Four Quartets* to a musical quartet, however, must not be exaggerated. In reality the exterior structure of the poem stands merely as a rough approximation of the form of Beethoven's quartets. Nor does Eliot's poem, as a literary adaptation of musical form, have a strict formal correspondence to any other quartets or symphonies.

First of all, the reading time for all four of Eliot's quartets is about the same as the playing time for a string quartet or classical symphony. The four poems of the *Quartets*, moreover, correspond to the four movements of a conventional quartet or symphony, except for the fact that the sonata-allegro form is repeated in all four movements of Eliot's poem. It might be preferable, therefore, to consider the entire work as *one quartet*, for all of the poems are united by interlocking patterns of

dominant images which project the two themes of eternity and temporal mutability.

A single movement of a musical quartet constitutes a separate, autonomous composition with its own distinctive themes and style. Similarly, each of Eliot's quartets conforms generally to the principle of autonomy and stylistic distinctness. Furthermore, like a movement in a musical quartet, each of Eliot's poems contains a full exposition, development, and recapitulation of themes. For these reasons each of the four quartets should perhaps be treated as a *movement* within the quartets as a whole.

The five divisions within each of Eliot's quartets have been called "movements" by several commentators. Since none of these divisions is formally complete (as a musical movement should certainly be), they must be analyzed simply as segments or sections within the movement which represent progressive phases of thematic development.

A parallel mode of thematic treatment informs each of the quartets. As the comments on the jacket of Eliot's recording indicate, the first section of each quartet presents "two or more subjects which are to be interwoven and eventually resolved." The second section treats one of the subjects in "two contrasting ways, and the ideas are expanded and developed." In the third section we encounter further explorations of the ideas presented in the first two sections. The brief fourth section represents a "purely lyrical" development of one of the subjects, while the fifth "recapitulates the earlier themes and resolves the contradiction" propounded in the opening section.<sup>7</sup> In a word, in each quartet "themes and counter-themes are modulated and interwoven," and "all four poems employ a recapitulation or coda with the last four lines of 'Little Gidding' as a thematic coda of the whole poem...."<sup>8</sup> This pattern of development might be typical for a *single movement within a musical quartet*, but not for an entire quartet.

Despite the fact that a different set of leading images dominates each of the poems, most of the important image pat-

terns occur in two or more of the poems. The motto-image of the garden, representing the eternity theme, is found in all four poems; that of the sea appears predominantly in "Dry Salvages," although it receives light treatment in both "East Coker" and "Little Gidding." The subordinate image of water (rivers, pools, ponds, and rain, as distinguished from sea-water) appears in all of the poems except "East Coker," where it appears to be absorbed, as it were, by the dominant earth-image of that poem. The interweaving and overlapping of these and other images from poem to poem suggest a pattern of structural organization which departs radically from Beethoven's sonata-allegro form inasmuch as Beethoven selected different subjects and styles for each of the movements within his quartets and symphonies.

Because of the recurrence of dominant image patterns throughout the four poems, the true form of the *Four Quartets* in many respects resembles the format of Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*, which represents an elaboration on the traditional sonata-allegro form. In addition to the regular introduction, development, and recapitulation of themes, Berlioz introduces a *motto-theme* to unite all the movements of his symphony and, owing to the recurrence of this theme in each movement, the form is called *cyclical*.

Either by coincidence or by the author's intention, the structural organization of the *Four Quartets* bears at least as much resemblance to Berlioz's cyclical form as it does to the form of Beethoven's string quartets. For whatever reason, Eliot exploits the motto-theme device, for all of the poems are threaded together by means of motto-images. These images, in projecting the two themes of eternity and temporal mutability, create a highly integrated thematic texture.

But whether the external structure of the *Four Quartets* is more like the form of Beethoven's quartets or the cyclical organization of Berlioz's symphonies, the important thing to remember, according to Marcello Pagnini, is that Eliot's poetic dialect conforms to the dialect of musical

discourse. Besides that part of the poetic discourse involving the interweaving of opposing themes, the quartets also allow for a dialect of opposing voices. Eliot varies his voices like instruments used in a musical quartet, and in "Burnt Norton," for example, one can distinguish two voices, the lyric and the didactic.<sup>9</sup> These voices, however, are variant manifestations of a single voice in different moods. Hence the quartets lack the complexity of *The Waste Land* with its multiplicity of dramatic voices. As B. H. Fussell remarks, the poem is a dialogue that reveals the profoundly subjective experiences of "a single consciousness in the act of thinking and feeling..."; it is an interior dialogue involving the fusion of opposing voices.<sup>10</sup>

The tension created by these oppositions in voice and theme is reinforced by tensions arising from the flow of meaning. Tense moments are often followed by sudden resolutions and resolutions dissolve into conflicts, with lyric smoothness alternating with the roughness of unresolved dilemmas. This flow of tensions and resolutions resembles the changing harmonic progressions in a musical composition in which dissonances resolve into harmonies.

Since the structural organization of the *Four Quartets* does not conform exactly to any recognized musical format, Eliot's poem must be judged ultimately by standards which are primarily literary. And regardless of Eliot's success in exploiting the musical idiom, the musical influences must be weighed carefully against the complexly varied influences deriving from literature, philosophy, and religion.

Chief among the literary influences are the medieval theological notions and concrete symbolic imagery of Dante. The rendering of such concise visual images as that of the fire and the rose with their multiple symbolic connotations is traceable to Dante's influence. Despite the final glimpse of paradise in "Little Gidding," the predominant coloring of Eliot's poem is purgatorial, and with Eliot as with Dante the image of fire often symbolizes spiritual purgation and divine suffering as well as the burning away of carnal de-

sires. From the point of view of "overall structural framework," the quartets appear to be arranged according to "an ordered scale of emotions" such as one finds in the *Inferno*. This scale provides a scaffold for the progression of purgatorial effects in Eliot's poem.<sup>11</sup>

Reinforcing the emotional and religious scaffolding of the *Four Quartets* is Eliot's symbolic use of Heraclitus' four basic elements—air, earth, water, and fire. Each element represents the dominant symbolism for each of the quartets. "Burnt Norton" is dominated by the symbol of air, which signifies the breath of life, spiritual resuscitation, the destruction of earthly things; it is "the wind that sweeps the gloomy hills of London..." "East Coker" is elemented by earth and is characterized by the earthly village dancers. In "Dry Salvages," dominated by water imagery, symbolic manifestations of river and sea are presented. The last of the poems, "Little Gidding," is symbolized by fire, progressing from the image of the sun flaming on ice to the "crowned knot of fire" at the poem's climactic ending.

The philosophy of Heraclitus also thickens the poem's thematic structure. In order to underscore the temporal mutability theme with firm philosophical concepts, Eliot borrows Heraclitus's notion that everything is in a state of eternal flux; that is, everything is in the process of becoming, nothing is complete, and nothing is permanent except change itself. But for this ceaseless change not to become chaos, "it must conform to fixed patterns under the control of a divine intelligence," which is the Logos or still point around which the wheel of flux turns;<sup>12</sup> it is the unmoving spiritual force which governs the endless Heraclitan movement. The wheel of flux, then, is a symbolic projection of the temporal mutability theme while the still point symbolizes the theme of eternity. Both themes are synthesized in the image of the wheel of flux turning around the still point.

Even the images of the poem seem to exist in a state of Heraclitan flux. The idea of eternal recurrence is echoed in the recurrence of leading symbols—the sea, the

rose-garden, the fire. These occur in all or most of the poems, reflecting a world of changing appearances. In moving from quartet to quartet the reader is aware of a sort of shadowy dance of returning images or recurring thematic components that flit in and out of the poem's ideological structure illuminating the principal themes. This dance of leading images is governed or "timed" by a firm metrical structure which varies according to subject and mood yet consistently reflects the poet's changing voices.

The metrical structure of the *Four Quartets* reveals Eliot's musicological perception of poetic rhythm. In choosing the four-stress accentual line as his norm for the poem, Eliot settled on a type of metrical sequence which approximates the measured sequence of a melodic line in music: while the number of unaccented notes or syllables may vary within each beat, the accents tend to fall with some degree of regularity; metrical unity here derives from the preponderance of recurring rhythmical units within a given sequence. In music these rhythmical units might be duplets, triplets, quadruplets, or multiples thereof; in poetry they are iambs, trochees, anapests, and so on.

As the metrical norm for all of the quartets, the four-stress accentual line recurs frequently throughout the poem. In its more regular and strongly accented form this line usually gives firm support to the eternity theme as illustrated in the beginning lines of "Burnt Norton":

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future . . .

When its metrical structure is somewhat more dense and heavy, yet tending to be regular in the disposition of accents, the labored cadence reflects the struggles of the artist in expressing difficult ideas—

Midwinter spring is its own season  
Sempiternal though sodden towards sundown,  
Suspended in time between pole and tropic.

The accentual tetrameter with its strong medial pause, according to Helen Gardner, provides Eliot with a flexible metrical base enabling him to shift at will into "the

evenness of duple or the ripple of triple rhythm," depending on the desired effect.<sup>13</sup>

The flexibility of the accentual tetrameter is such that it permits the poet to develop his ideas through rhythmic expansion. Harvey Gross illustrates Eliot's exploitation of this device with the following notations:

time present	
time past	
time future	
time is eternally	
time is unredeemable	

Here the rhythmic texture is thickened as the idea accumulates emotional power.<sup>14</sup> The rhythmic expansion device, incidentally, is often used by Beethoven in the opening sections of his quartets and symphonies.

Although Eliot's control of accentual sequences is assuredly refined and intensified by his musicological perceptions, the influence here is still primarily literary as it derives from such diverse sources as the Anglo-Saxon poets, Swinburne, and Ezra Pound. Eliot's use of conventional devices of versification, however, reflects influences that are more obviously literary in character.

Counterpointed against the accentual norm are sequences of rimed and conventional syllabic verse, occurring principally in the second and fourth sections of each quartet. Here we find iambic tetrameters closely but irregularly rimed; a sequence of rimed accentual tetrameters (as a variant on the earlier syllabic tetrameters); a variation on the sestina form; a sequence containing internal rimes; a succession of five stanzas in a fixed rime scheme; and so on. In each instance the regular meter and rime emphasize the lyric parts of the poem and are accompanied by imagery of unusual symbolic richness.

In the lines beginning "If you came this way in may time . . .," Eliot uses a combination of rich Tennysonian assonance and internal rime to underscore the sensu-

ous beauty and heavy voluptuousness of the scene. Such luxuriant effects, however, are sporadic and rare in the poem. As in Eliot's use of rime and traditional English metric, they serve chiefly to intensify the lyrical episodes of the poem in contrast to the discursive passages.

In opposition to the many highly rhythmical and imagistic passages in the quartets are several sustained passages which seem utterly lacking in rhythmical character. Indeed, if one subscribes to the principle of regularity in the succession of accents as well as to that of dominant and subordinate rhythmical figurations as being fundamental requirements of verse, then certain parts of the poem cannot be considered verse at all. A case in point might be the following lines from "The Dry Salvages":

I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant  
—Among other things—or one way of putting the  
same thing . . .

Here one perceives the irregular rhythms and unsteady tempos of English prose discourse. There are no predominating rhythmical figurations, no subordinate variants, no regular beats—only a hodge-podge of heterogeneous rhythmical units.

Yet many of these prosaic passages serve a particular function. Like the Cockney scene in *The Waste Land* but lacking its racy, repetitive colloquial rhythms, these passages are pieces of prose collage introduced into what is primarily a verse medium. At their worst they seem like awkward and digressive interpolations. At their best, however, they heighten the realism of the poem and paradoxically expand the sphere of poetry by adding a non-poetic dimension to the quartets. Within the stricter context of the poem itself they exist in dynamic opposition to the lyrical passages and seem appropriate to the discursive purposes of the poet.

At all events, the *Four Quartets* abundantly illustrate Eliot's skill in adapting a variety of formal devices, both musical and literary, to the changing flow of meaning. Although the earlier verse also reflects Eliot's adaptive skills, the modified sonata-allegro form of the quartets provides the poet with a more orderly mode of thematic

development than do the forms of his earlier work. Hence, in comparison with "Gerontion" or *The Waste Land*, the progression of stylistic effects in the quartets is more regularized, with easier transitions and more sustained patterns of development.

The fruitfulness of the sonata-allegro form notwithstanding, Eliot was too much a master of eclectic synthesis to rely heavily on any one musical form, or even on a number of musical formats. By syncretically fusing several important musical and literary influences in the composition of his poem, he was able to produce something that seems to go beyond poetry—that is, a species of writing which expands the dimensions of poetry by exploiting non-poetic devices.

As the last great masterpiece of T. S. Eliot, the *Four Quartets* crown the poet's lifelong struggles with artistic form. In addition, Eliot's masterpiece resolves a lifetime of spiritual conflict and wrestling with difficult metaphysical and philosophical ideas. As a literary work of art the poem predominantly reflects the efforts, not of a musician, but of a sensitive literary craftsman, albeit with refined musical tastes, who has succeeded in exploiting

certain musicological and literary devices in an effort to articulate a new kind of poetry. Perhaps Eliot's last great performance is indeed "a poetry beyond poetry."

<sup>1</sup> "Eliot, Beethoven and J. W. N. Sullivan," *Comparative Literature*, IX (1957), 322.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 327–30.

<sup>3</sup> Gross, "Music and the Analogue of Feeling: Notes on Eliot and Beethoven," *The Centennial Review of Arts and Science*, III (1959), 282.

<sup>4</sup> *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot* (New York, 1959), p. 306.

<sup>5</sup> Unpubl. diss. (Northwestern U., 1958), by Dorothy E. Rambo, "An Analysis of *Four Quartets* by Eliot with Particular Respect to Its Prosody," pp. 72–73.

<sup>6</sup> "T. S. Eliot: 'the Music of Ideas,'" *University of Toronto Quarterly*, XVIII (1948), 22.

<sup>7</sup> "Four Quartets," Angel 45012, Electric and Musical Industries (U. S.) Ltd.

<sup>8</sup> Unpubl. diss. (U. of Wisconsin, 1960), by Gordon Kay Grigsby, "The Modern Long Poem: Studies in Thematic Form," p. 422.

<sup>9</sup> "La Musicalità dei 'Four Quartets,'" *Belfagor*, XIII (1958), 435–36.

<sup>10</sup> "Structural Methods in *Four Quartets*," *Journal of English Literary History*, XXII (1955), 212–14.

<sup>11</sup> Rambo, pp. 34–35.

<sup>12</sup> Rambo, pp. 51–53.

<sup>13</sup> *The Art of T. S. Eliot* (London, 1949), p. 29.

<sup>14</sup> Gross, p. 276.