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## "The Progress of the Intellectual Soul": Eliot, Pascal, and *Four Quartets*

### I

IT HAS BEEN the general consensus of criticism that no interpretation of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* and of its inner dynamics can afford to ignore the five-part form common to all the poems in the cycle. Whether described in musical terms or in terms of thematic or symbolic patterning, this aspect of the poetic structure has been recognized as crucial to the effect achieved in each "quartet."<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, it is a peculiarity of *Four Quartets* that the kind of progression found in this five-part sequence, and thus incorporated by each poem in its own distinctive way, is also characteristic of the cycle of poems as a whole. This means, however, that what the reader or critic most needs to note is not that the poetic form has exactly five parts (obviously the cycle itself has only four), but that it indeed constitutes a sequence containing, and perhaps representing, a definite progression the nature of which deserves investigation.

Among those critics who have seen the inadequacy of a strictly "musical" analysis of the form of the *Quartets*, several of the more astute have taken seriously Eliot's life-long interest in mysticism and have

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<sup>1</sup> One of the most thorough—and most critical—analyses of this five-part structure is given by C. K. Stead in *The New Poetic: Yeats to Eliot* (London: Penguin, 1964). For a fascinating, if controversial, account of the relationship of this structure to the structure of the whole work see Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot* (1959; 2d ed. rev., Harcourt Brace & World, 1969), pp. 289–323. Three of the best studies in structure which have played the analogy with musical form for all it is worth are Helen Gardner, *The Art of T. S. Eliot* (1950; 6th ed., London: Faber, 1968); Thomas R. Rees, *The Technique of T. S. Eliot: A Study of the Orchestration of Meaning in Eliot's Poetry* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974); and Keith Alldritt, *Eliot's Four Quartets: Poetry as Chamber Music* (London: Woburn Press, 1978). Some of the comparisons, especially with sonata-allegro form, are clearly useful but can also clearly be carried too far.

therefore attempted to correlate the various sections of the poetry with different stages of the mystic way toward union with God.<sup>2</sup> This is understandable, since *Four Quartets* does, after all, allude to various classics of mysticism: Buddhist and Hindu scriptures, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the writings of St. John of the Cross, the "shewings" of Mother Julian of Norwich, and the like. Certain passages of the poetry even seem to embody, through their very imagery, some kind of mystical or quasi-mystical vision. Then, too, we know that Eliot read widely in mysticism when he was an undergraduate at Harvard and later made the acquaintance of Evelyn Underhill, whose book *Mysticism* he knew as a landmark of scholarship on the subject.<sup>3</sup> It thus seems plausible that the progression represented by stages in the *Quartets* should have some connection with mysticism.

But it may be that the connection is much less direct than most critics have supposed. The chief goal of the poetic speaker's effort to order his present life and thought is never depicted by Eliot as being mystical rapture, however muted. Nor, for that matter, is the goal that contrasting kind of union with God which is sought in the "apophatic" mystic tradition and described therein as a special darkness and emptiness;<sup>4</sup> for the phases of darkness are not seen in any of the "quartets" as the ultimate destination nor as times in which the speaker is at one with God. Lastly, the critics would have done well to notice that the speaker in the *Quartets* is never in fact represented as having progressed beyond the third step of the ten which St. John of the Cross describes in his discussion of the ladder by which the soul ascends to God.<sup>5</sup> And, since

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Sister Bernadette Counihan, "Four Quartets: An Ascent to Mount Carmel?", *Wisconsin Studies in Literature*, VI (1969), 58-71; William T. Moynihan, "Character and Action in *Four Quartets*," *Mosaic*, VI (1972), 203-28; and A. D. Moody, *Thomas Stearns Eliot: Poet* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 239-42. The last is by far the most sophisticated and scholarly. Moynihan's discussion also has much to offer; but one must be leery of his argument that the five sections of each poem depict levels of awareness and action closely resembling the five stages of the mystic way as described by Evelyn Underhill, for the correspondence Moynihan finds between the third part of each "quartet" and the third stage of the mystic's progress is based on an outright misreading of Underhill. Moynihan mistakenly characterizes Underhill's third stage as that of "purgatio bringing illumination" (my emphasis), whereas it is clear (despite some grammatical complexity) that Underhill is referring to a stage of *illumination* which has been brought about by purgation. See Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (1911; rpt. Dutton, 1961), p. 169.

<sup>3</sup> See Lyndall Gordon, *Eliot's Early Years* (Oxford University Press, 1977), Appendix I; and Helen Gardner, *The Composition of "Four Quartets"* (London: Faber, 1978), pp. 69-70.

<sup>4</sup> For a short but lucid discussion of apophatic mysticism, see John F. Teahan, "Thomas Merton and the Apophatic Tradition," *Journal of Religion*, LVIII (1978), 263-87.

<sup>5</sup> Saint John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, Book Two, chapters nineteen and twenty. Here I am in full agreement with Robert J. Andreach, who argues that Eliot—whose speaker in the *Quartets* never gets beyond the stage of active purgation—is "not really interested in spiritual growth that leads to illumination and on to union so much as he is interested in affirming the necessity of the spiritual life." *Studies in Structure: The Stages of the Spiritual Life in Four Modern Authors* (Fordham University Press, 1964), p. 93.

St. John of the Cross is the source for Eliot's lengthiest quotation from mystical literature, it should not pass unmarked that this quotation, found in "East Coker" III, is taken from a passage concerning the very first stage of the journey toward God—a stage which is prior to faith itself.<sup>6</sup>

All of which suggests that perhaps the speaker in the poem is not destined to be a mystic, and that the brief moments of quasi-mystical experience known by the speaker function in a different way in his life from the way they would in the life of one whose "occupation" is to "apprehend / The point of intersection of the timeless / With time" (DS:V). This thesis is further supported by the obvious fact that the "I" of the *Quartets* is essentially a representation of Eliot himself, who can hardly be said to have seen himself as a full-fledged mystic. The overall sequence of thoughts and feelings presented in each poem seems, therefore, to represent a development within the experience not of an aspiring mystic, but simply of a thoughtful and sensitive human being and poet whose life includes moments of special and seemingly transcendent significance.

But this still leaves us with the question of just what kind of development within thought and experience these poems might represent.<sup>7</sup> Fortunately, the answer to that question begins to be evident when we carefully consider the well-known essay which Eliot wrote on Pascal and published in 1931, just a few years before he began work on "Burnt Norton."<sup>8</sup>

## II

It has been said more than once that Pascal's *Pensées* may be read as a preface to *Four Quartets*.<sup>9</sup> Be that as it may, I am persuaded that at least the essay which Eliot wrote to introduce the *Pensées* may be read in this way. And I think that Staffan Bergsten puts us on the right track when he observes that Eliot's characterization of Pascal as an intelligent

<sup>6</sup> Saint John of the Cross, *The Ascent to Mount Carmel*, Book One, chapter thirteen.

<sup>7</sup> The very fact that there could be some question as to this indicates that the poetry represents its "subject" in a highly metaphoric and condensed way, rather as a Post-Impressionist painting might. One is aware of the way the medium is used before one is fully aware of what it represents. In the *Quartets*, however, the subject can still be made out.

<sup>8</sup> T. S. Eliot, "The *Pensées* of Pascal," in *Selected Essays*, 3d ed. (London: Faber, 1951), pp. 402–16. First published as the introduction to the Everyman Library edition of the *Pensées*, trans. W. F. Trotter (London: Dent, 1931), pp. vii–xix.

<sup>9</sup> See Staffan Bergsten, *Time and Eternity: A Study in the Structure and Symbolism of T. S. Eliot's "Four Quartets"* (Upsala, 1960; rpt. Humanities Press, 1973), p. 70.

believer writing of the progress of the intellectual soul seems to be a perfect characterization of the later Eliot himself.<sup>10</sup> But Bergsten does not go much beyond this broad statement. Furthermore, he misunderstands Eliot to be saying in his essay that Pascal is "the counterpart and forerunner of the modern Christian mystic"<sup>11</sup>—which is certainly not the case.

If we look beyond Bergsten's remarks to Eliot's essay itself, we will find a very different picture of Pascal's own so-called mysticism. More important, we will discover that the essay serves in at least two other respects to shed light on the *Quartets*. First, as Bergsten hints, Eliot's portrait of Pascal bears a remarkable resemblance to his portrait of the poetic speaker—and hence of himself—in each "quartet." And, second, the purpose and reflective structure which Eliot attributes to the *Pensées* is, as we will see, revealingly similar to that which is exhibited by each of the "quartets" and, in some measure, by the work as a whole.

Pascal, Eliot declares early in his essay, was a man who had mystical experiences without being a mystic. But this is not unusual, Eliot observes, for "what can only be called mystical experience happens to many men who do not become mystics." Indeed, something roughly analogous to such an experience sometimes occurs in literary composition, when "a piece of writing meditated, apparently without progress, for months or years, may suddenly take shape and word." What Eliot finds more noteworthy than Pascal's mystical experience *per se* is the fact that Pascal was a person who was at once "highly passionate and ardent, but passionate only through a powerful and regulated intellect": a person whose "intellectual passion for truth" was reinforced by "his passionate dissatisfaction with human life unless a spiritual explanation could be found." The rigor of Pascal's intellect, combined with the intensity of his passion for a "spiritual explanation," meant that he would at times despair of himself and others. Standing as "a man of the world among ascetics, and an ascetic among men of the world," he delivered a skeptical and disillusioned analysis of human bondage. But, Eliot insists, Pascal's skepticism should be distinguished, on account of its penetration and integrity, from the skepticism of the ordinary unbeliever, who is "lazy-minded, incurious, absorbed in vanities, and tepid in emotion, and is therefore incapable of either much doubt or much faith." And Pascal's analysis of human bondage, while disillusioned, is

<sup>10</sup> Bergsten, p. 70.

<sup>11</sup> Bergsten, p. 69.

nonetheless perceptive; indeed, Eliot says, "our heart tells us that it corresponds exactly to the facts and cannot be dismissed as mental disease." Eliot observes, moreover, that for people like Pascal the moments of despair and skepticism are "the analogue of the drought, the dark night, which is an essential stage in the progress of the Christian mystic"; thus, they are "a necessary prelude to, and element in, the joy of faith." In Pascal's case, therefore, we see a skepticism that neither "stops at the question" nor "ends in denial," but leads to faith and "is somehow integrated into the faith which transcends it"—a faith in the Incarnation.

And what of the *Pensées*—those vivid and provocative fragments which were eventually to have constituted an apology for Christianity? Eliot emphasizes that Pascal wrote these not primarily as a scientist or systematic philosopher, nor even as an academic theologian constructing a work of formal apologetics, but as "a great literary artist" whose major work would, if completed, "have been also his own spiritual autobiography." And it is written in a style which Eliot describes as "free from all diminishing idiosyncrasies, [and] yet very personal." Eliot acknowledges, of course, that Pascal intended the *Pensées* to have a theological, apologetic function. Yet, Eliot claims, Pascal's first and essential aim in this crowning work was "to explain to himself the sequence which culminates in faith," and to do so with the heart as well as the head; because, for Pascal, "in theological matters which seemed to him much larger, more difficult, and more important than scientific matters, the whole personality is involved." His work would thus have universal significance not by being impersonal but by addressing at a personal level matters of universal import. Pascal could do this because he himself was, in Eliot's view, representative of a certain kind of person who is found in every age—the doubting intellectual soul—and because he used a method of exploring the basis of faith which is, on the whole, "the method natural and right for the Christian." For all these reasons, Eliot closes by saying, there is "no religious writer more pertinent to our time."

The great mystics, like St. John of the Cross, are primarily for readers with a special determination of purpose; the devotional writers, such as St. François de Sales, are primarily for those who already feel consciously desirous of the love of God; the great theologians are for those interested in theology. But I can think of no Christian writer . . . more to be commended than Pascal to those who doubt, but who have the mind to conceive, and the sensibility to feel, the disorder, the futility, the meaninglessness, the mystery of life and suffering, and who can only find peace through a satisfaction of the whole being.

I have quoted at length from Eliot's own words partly because they convey with such force how keenly Eliot feels Pascal's contemporary relevance, and partly because they reveal the extent to which Pascal's personality and concerns, when seen through Eliot's eyes, are related to Eliot himself and the concerns embodied in the *Quartets*. One cannot help being struck by the fact that almost every major aspect of Eliot's portrait of Pascal has its correlative in Eliot's own self-portrait in the *Quartets*. For in these poems the poetic speaker, who naturally represents Eliot, is like Pascal in being passionate, "but passionate only through a powerful and regulated intellect." And, like Pascal, he is an intellectual soul whose passion is for truth and for a spiritual explanation for his life and reality as he finds it. He is ascetic, and yet a man of the world; a man given mystical experiences, but not a mystic; a skeptic, and yet one whose skepticism "is somehow integrated into the faith which transcends it." And while he is deeply convinced of human bondage and vanity, and scornful of the skepticism of the ordinary unbeliever, his despair and disillusionment do not lead him to a thoroughgoing pessimism like Voltaire's but, rather, to a state which is analogous to the mystic's dark night of the soul, this being an "essential stage" in his progress. Finally, the "I" who speaks in the *Quartets* is a literary artist who is proceeding toward the goal which Eliot considers to be Pascal's as well: faith in the Incarnation.

The parallels extend beyond this similarity between Eliot's poetic persona and his image of Pascal, however. For the *Quartets* itself and each poem therein could be characterized in somewhat the same way that Eliot characterizes the *Pensées*. Every "quartet" appears to be a kind of spiritual autobiography, or a portion of one, having a theological component. Each one is written in a style which is "free from all diminishing idiosyncrasies," and yet very "personal." And *Four Quartets* could surely be seen as addressing the same audience to whom Eliot so fervently commends the *Pensées*. For though the *Quartets* deals with spiritual and theological matters, it is not mystical literature "for readers with a special determination of purpose," nor devotional literature "for those who already feel consciously desirous of the love of God," nor is it simply a work for those "interested in theology." Instead, *Four Quartets* appears to address the mind and sensibility of that person "who can only find peace through a satisfaction of the whole being." And I would now advance the hypothesis that it does this by exploring, in each poem, not the way to mystic union with God, but simply "the sequence which culminates in faith." Which is precisely what Eliot claims the *Pensées* is intended to do.

But what might that sequence be? And how might a Christian poet go about reconstructing, through the structure of a poem, the chief elements of that sequence? Almost midway through his essay on Pascal, Eliot describes what he understands to be the essence of the procedure Pascal—and, generally speaking, any intelligent believer—uses in explaining to himself this very sequence. According to Eliot, such a person

finds the world to be so and so; he finds its character inexplicable by any non-religious theory: among religions he finds Christianity, and Catholic Christianity, to account most satisfactorily for the world and especially for the moral world within; and thus, by what Newman calls "powerful and concurrent" reasons, he finds himself inexorably committed to the dogma of the Incarnation.

Even prior to examining the specific structure of any of the "quartets," we can easily see that there is at least one important respect in which this kind of reflective project resembles Eliot's project of poetic exploration, or does so when looked at from Eliot's perspective. For the project described above is that of someone who, from a standpoint within faith, is both re-expressing for himself and others the basis for faith in the Incarnation and also tracing the development of his own religious awareness as it has been "inexorably" drawn toward that faith. And, like the *Quartets*, this project has about it a certain interesting ambiguity: its author sees the progression toward faith from a Christian point of view, but at the same time explores it in such a way as to re-experience it in the present; he "finds himself inexorably committed," as though he weren't already. Thus Eliot says that, in writing the first sections of the *Pensées*, Pascal is actually (again) "facing unflinchingly the demon of doubt which is inseparable from the spirit of belief." And so, one feels, is the author of the first section of each "quartet."

It could fairly be objected that the method described above sounds too formal and intellectual to be used in literature. And certainly Eliot never claims that this is a peculiarly literary method. But he does indicate that it is nevertheless the means by which Pascal reflects on the essential moments of his spiritual progress and is thus the skeleton upon which Pascal fleshes out his *Pensées*. And for Eliot that work is indeed literary, and more literary than theological. Furthermore, as we have seen, Eliot explicitly informs us that Pascal's method is the one which is "natural and right" for the Christian who is meditating on the sequence that leads to faith. This is particularly significant in view of the fact that it is, after all, Eliot himself who formulates "Pascal's" method by making inferences from the relatively unsystematic arrangement of the fragments Pascal left us. And it is Eliot who thereby makes it sound as

though Pascal's topics lead in a logical and linear sequence toward the doctrine of the Incarnation,<sup>12</sup> whereas the truth of the matter is that—as one modern account of Pascal's approach makes clear—the “method” actually used in the *Pensées* is scarcely more logical and direct than the “method” of *Four Quartets* itself, when considered as a whole:

Pascal's method is deliberately not linear, and consists of converging arguments, all directed to the same end but with different starting points. In his own words: “Jesus Christ is the object of all things, the centre towards which all things tend.”<sup>13</sup>

Thus, if Eliot could attribute to Pascal the method which Eliot himself formulates in his essay, we are surely justified in attributing to Eliot the capacity for using some such method in his own literary meditation on the sequence which culminates in faith.

The sequence as it is described above, however, is largely a sequence of thoughts; it is a mode of rational explanation. In the final portion of this article I intend to show that the five-part sequence found in the individual “quartets” includes this sequence, but as a kind of bare framework which the poetry fills out. This the poetry does by representing through image, idea, and metaphor the same sorts of thought and experience which Eliot describes in his essay when he elaborates on what each stage of the sequence actually involves and, especially, when he discusses Pascal's own personal journey toward faith. To make this evident, I outline the general structure of the “action” common to all the poems and, in the process, also refer specifically to one particular poem which in many ways typifies the rest: “East Coker.”

### III

In each “quartet” the poetic speaker begins his meditative reflection at the point where Eliot says Pascal begins: that is, by observing his world to be “so and so.” In point of fact, he finds the world of his experience to be bound within the limits of time and yet also inexplicably graced by quasi-mystical moments seemingly transcendent of time. He therefore recognizes, in Section I, certain basic limitations and tantalizing possibilities of human life, and at least implicitly expresses his dissatisfaction with such life “unless a spiritual explanation . . . be found.” Hence, one senses from the first of each “quartet” that the

<sup>12</sup> Many editions of the *Pensées*, including that for which Eliot's essay serves as an introduction, alter Pascal's arrangement of topics in such a way as to suggest a more linear argument than Pascal had in mind. Even then, however, Eliot's account is definitely a simplification and a somewhat personal interpretation.

<sup>13</sup> From A. J. Krailsheimer's introduction to his translation of the *Pensées* (London: Penguin, 1968), p. 26.

speaker's search is not for an abstract understanding of time, but for a "satisfaction of the whole being."

The opening section of "East Coker" conforms almost perfectly to this pattern. In meditating on the village of East Coker and its surroundings, the speaker contemplates a microcosm: nature, society, history, the self. And he glimpses a higher order of things which is alluded to by way of Sir Thomas Elyot's words concerning the "concorde" of the sacrament of marriage, and which is likewise implicit in the images of the circle dance and of the cosmic rhythm of the "living seasons." But that ultimate, and ultimately sacred, order is seen only in a fleeting and illusory way, since it appears in what is, after all, but a brief vision of a past era which has now come to "dung and death." And the speaker is facing not only the death of a cultural era; he is also facing his own mortality. Indeed, the point of departure for his whole meditation is his realization that the order of things which he would humanly desire is seemingly incompatible with the natural order, an order in which there is no life without death: "In my beginning is my end." And because the speaker is like Pascal in having a rigorous intellect as well as a passionate nature, his realizations create in him a passionate dissatisfaction with life as it is and a desire for a "spiritual explanation." It is from this incipient spiritual dissatisfaction with himself and his world that the speaker's exploration will take its impetus as it moves toward its "end" and a new beginning.

In Section II of each poem the speaker invariably meditates further on the contrast between the possibilities glimpsed in Section I and his ordinary experience of life and the lives of others, these lives being characterized by vacuity, vanity, and meaningless, eccentric movement. Hence, his perceptions are fully in accordance with what Eliot in his essay says someone like Pascal discovers when he examines the world within and about himself. For such a person will, in Eliot's view, find the world distressingly "disordered." But while the disillusioned speaker cannot simply accept this condition, it seems that no "spiritual explanation," or at least no direct way "up" from this state of bondage, is available to him. He can only acknowledge that—as Eliot goes on to say in reference to this stage of awareness—"certain developments of character, and what in the highest sense can be called 'saintliness' are inherently and by inspection known to be good." The conviction and action which would be in complete harmony with this awareness are yet to come.

In looking at "East Coker" II, we again see the pattern in concrete form. The lyric which opens this section describes nothing less than the

disintegration of the order of the cosmos which had been envisioned by the Renaissance and so reflected in its social, moral, and religious ideals. Though the astrological and mythological imagery is something with which the Renaissance would have been familiar, it here expresses the speaker's recognition of a kind of disorder which that era had believed impossible, and certainly impossible in the future "Golden Age" in which the speaker should now be living. Thus, this passage—written at the start of the Second World War—plainly indicates that, if the speaker is to find values by which to live, they cannot be those past values which modern culture has most cherished. It may at first seem, in fact, that the speaker's world of experience offers *no* values and *no* knowledge which could now be of use to him. In which case he has found only disorder and nothing which he knows "inherently and by inspection" to be good. If this were true, the speaker would certainly be moving toward the skepticism of Voltaire rather than sharing the qualified skepticism of Pascal. But it is not, in actuality, true. In the very act of recognizing human bondage, the speaker acknowledges the reality of certain values. When he criticizes the "fear of possession, / Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God," he implicitly affirms the value of loving self-surrender to others and to God. Moreover, when he declares humility to be "endless"—a very special quality, given the speaker's profound concern with "ends"—he is undoubtedly expressing a conviction that "certain developments of character" are inherently known to be good. The speaker's knowledge is, admittedly, negative knowledge, just as his subsequent course of action will be along a *via negativa*. But it is knowledge nonetheless, corresponding to that which Eliot sees Pascal as attaining.

When we reach Section III of each of the "quartets," an important change occurs, or seems already to have occurred. After again reflecting on humanity's bondage and empty striving, the speaker acts on a new-found religious conviction. Drawing on various religious, and indeed mystic, ways of interpreting "right action" and human possibility, the speaker now seeks to empty himself of empty self-possession and to move away from chaotic movement. He thus pursues a *via negativa*: a "way down" by means of negation, non-action, humility, discipline, and a profound emptying of self, sense, and desire. Only in this way, the speaker seems to feel, can grace find one and grant the beginning of love and wisdom, the "way down" thereby becoming the "way up." Hence the speaker, like the Pascal of Eliot's essay, begins at this stage to turn toward specifically religious ways of understanding and being; but, in order to do so, he finds he must enter a state which is analogous to the

mystic's dark night of the soul and which is an essential "moment" in his progress.

Section III of "East Coker" vividly represents such a moment and its antecedents. If Eliot's Pascal is tempted to despair when confronted by the vanity and emptiness of human striving, so is Eliot's poetic speaker. He delivers a mock funeral lament for himself and society: one which sounds distinctly hollow, consisting of a litany of titles, abstract functions, and mundane institutions. The truth seems to be that the speaker can at this point feel no genuine grief; his own life has been emptied of the substance of which grief is made. And since the same is true for all the others participating in this funeral, it is "nobody's funeral, for there is no one to bury." It is this realization of ultimate emptiness which makes way for a more positive and more religious emptying, this being the "way down" into the dark night of the soul. Three analogies for this way are given, whereupon the speaker takes up the words of St. John of the Cross in which the negative way receives one of its classic descriptions. It is plainly a moment as essential to the poetic speaker's progress as it is for the Pascal of Eliot's essay.

Section IV is the shortest one in every poem, but is always of utmost importance. Here the speaker utters a kind of prayer, and in fact a Christian prayer, addressed—if only implicitly—either to some person, or persons, of the Trinity or to Mary. (Eliot's Christianity, like Pascal's, is essentially Catholic, though of the Anglican variety.) This prayer marks, therefore, the crucial point at which the speaker turns toward not only religion but also an identifiably Christian answer to his deeply felt need. In all of the poems except "Burnt Norton," moreover, this answer is presented in its most challenging, "scandalous," and paradoxical form—one bound to be a stumbling block of apparent foolishness to anyone not prepared to abandon prior "sense and notion." Yet there is evidently a sense in which, for the speaker, this paradoxical answer most fully takes into account the world of his experience, and especially what Eliot terms, in his essay, "the moral world within." The answer approached by the speaker is, consequently, not seen as totally irrational; its reasons are simply those of the heart.

True to form, the fourth section of "East Coker" is a short, prayerful meditation on the mystery of the Incarnation in its most scandalous dimension—the passion of the God who "became flesh and dwelt among us." As represented in "East Coker," however, the Atonement event is not something confined to a single moment in history but is rather—like Incarnation in the other "quartets"—a principle forever at work in the structure of things. And the poem draws theological support

for this view through its use of Eucharistic imagery in the final strophe, since in the Eucharist the Sacrifice is perpetually re-enacted:

The dripping blood our only drink,  
The bloody flesh our only food:  
In spite of which we like to think  
That we are sound, substantial flesh and blood—  
Again, in spite of that, we call this Friday good.

The theology implicit in this lyric certainly cannot be accused of over-emphasizing human merit. Indeed, as Eliot notes in a letter to Anne Ridler, Brother George Every called it "Jansenist"—by which Brother George must have meant that Eliot stresses here the worthlessness of human effort and the seemingly arbitrary character of grace,<sup>14</sup> which is, of course, a very interesting observation in view of the fact that it was the Jansenist cause which Pascal himself took up some time prior to writing his *Pensées*. One cannot, then, be too surprised to find Eliot arguing, in his Pascal essay, that "a moment of Jansenism may naturally take place, and take place rightly, in the individual; particularly in the life of a man of great and intense intellectual powers." It would seem that the poetic speaker is such a man.

The fifth and final section of every "quartet" shows the speaker's meditative journey as similar to Pascal's in leading "inexorably" and by heartfelt, "concurrent reasons" toward Incarnation. Following a humble account of the limited powers of his poetic art, the speaker moves on to celebrate the reality of what has nevertheless been discovered, offering his recollection of the major significant experiences which have acted powerfully and concurrently to guide his search. Inevitably they appear in a new light, radiant with heightened significance. The old pattern is seen in transfigured form. Its meaning is comprehended—however darkly—and in fact comprehended within the framework of the Christian faith. Thus, even in the first two "quartets," the speaker returns with fuller knowledge to the place from which his meditative journey started. But Eliot's beginning point in each successive "quartet" is progressively closer to an explicitly Christian understanding of things. It is especially at the end of the whole cycle, therefore, that the speaker clearly apprehends the earlier moments of special, "mystical" awareness in a new way. He sees them not as ends in themselves, nor merely as ephemeral occasions of inexplicable happiness, but as signs of grace present in

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Gardner, *The Composition of "Four Quartets,"* p. 109.

(while not restricted to) the natural, temporal order. In short, they themselves are recognized as minor instances of Incarnation, the reality toward which Eliot describes Pascal's own search as ultimately moving. And it is, finally, in the light of Incarnation that the speaker is able to arrive at a transformed view of temporality and eternity, and so to approach a new mode of being—one which can be patient with penultimate goals like poetic art, and loving with temporal creation, and, lastly, hopeful of the new time when "all shall be well." This mode of being is not so much that of the mystic and saint as it is simply that of a person of faith.

Once more "East Coker" provides an instance of the pattern rather than an exception. Its final section opens with a confession not so much of sin as of finitude, the frustrated speaker admitting the inherent limitations of language, and of poetic art in particular. His every attempt is "a wholly new start" and "a different kind of failure." Yet, in the end, Section Five represents the speaker as having crossed over to an essentially affirmative approach to existence. The affirmations here are tentative, to be sure. Apparently the speaker will not have arrived at the full meaning of Incarnation—of what he here calls the "communion" between time and eternity—until he sees that the "here and now" of history does matter eternally, the historical pattern being simultaneously a "pattern of timeless moments" (LG:V). In the meantime, however, the speaker's fundamental orientation has shifted, for when the true order of the opening motto of "East Coker" is restored in the last line of the poem, this clearly signifies that the speaker's mode of being has undergone a life-giving reversal: "In my end is my beginning." Thus the speaker's lingering doubt is, like Pascal's, at last "somehow integrated into the faith which transcends it."

What I have described above seems, then, to be the basic "action" or "subject" represented differently in each of the "quartets." This is not to say that we find a one-to-one correlation between what is depicted in each section of each poem and the steps by which Eliot's Pascal is said to move toward faith and toward an understanding of his spiritual progress. But it should be apparent that the progression represented in these poems contains the essential moments of what Eliot in his essay calls "the sequence which culminates in faith." In each poem the speaker surveys the ambiguities of his experience of the world, reaches conclusions as how best to understand that experience, embraces a religious and then specifically Christian mode of response, and finally glimpses the true meaning of Incarnation. And in each poem this process is

described in many of the same terms used by Eliot to describe Pascal's personal experience.

That the broad outlines of this pattern can likewise be discerned in the *Quartets* as a whole should now require little demonstration. Critics have long noted that the overall tenor of the poems changes from "Burnt Norton" to "Little Gidding."<sup>15</sup> In the former the Christian elements are symbolically suggested rather than overtly expressed, the problematic or ambiguous perceptions of life receiving more emphasis than the hopeful and distinctly religious. With each "quartet," however, the speaker's beginning point is located ever closer to the sphere of conscious faith and obedience, until even the opening "vision" of "Little Gidding" has about it a quasi-Christian ambience, though far removed from that of devotional literature, and further still from the eschatological union of fire and rose envisioned in the last lines of the poem. Considered as a whole, therefore, *Four Quartets* can be seen to represent in a highly condensed and metaphoric way the thoughts and feelings intrinsic to the "progress of an intellectual soul" like Pascal and like Eliot himself.

The fact that the poetry of the *Quartets* has such a structure can probably be interpreted in many ways. But, in any event, it may be the surest indication we have that the work is neither a purely "musical" composition nor, in the end, simply a celebration of the way of the mystic. At the same time, it is plain that *Four Quartets* (like the *Pensées*) is more than autobiography and more, too, than Christian apologetics. As a complex exploration and articulation of experience, it is evidently designed to engage, deepen—and in some measure transform—the perceptions of those to whom (as Eliot felt) Pascal himself could matter most: namely, "those who doubt, but who have the mind to conceive, and the sensibility to feel . . . the mystery of life and suffering, and who can only find peace through a satisfaction of the whole being."

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, David Perkins, "Rose-garden to Midwinter Spring: Achieved Faith in the *Four Quartets*," reprinted in Bernard Bergonzi, ed., *"Four Quartets": A Casebook* (London: Macmillan, 1969), pp. 254–59.