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## "OUR FIRST WORLD": T. S. ELIOT AND THE EDENIC IMAGINATION

Jewel Spears Brooker

In the final lines of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the Theban elders point to the fallen king and say, "Look at Oedipus—proof that no...mortal can truly be thought of as happy...until he is dead." No one's life, Sophocles suggests, can be understood from a snapshot, a framed moment of shame or glory cut off from context and the flow of events; the significance of a life can only be gauged retrospectively, as a whole. Similarly, the work of a poet should be read as a whole, for the beginning and the end are reciprocally illuminating parts of one thing, one journey. Eliot's work has never been read as a whole, largely because much of it has been sequestered in archives. Over the next few years, all of the writing controlled by his estate (poetry, plays, prose,

letters) will be published in scholarly editions,<sup>1</sup> an event that will make it possible to construct a richer portrait of his life and art. His complete prose, the first volume of which includes over twenty unpublished philosophical essays, is especially important for clarifying the spiritual and intellectual roots of his imagination.

My thesis is that Eliot had an Edenic imagination, an understanding of which is only possible when his writing is considered retrospectively, as a whole. The Edenic imagination is a religious version of the dialectical imagination, which simultaneously contains and transcends contradictions, moving forward by moving back (Brooker, *Mastery and Escape* 1-20). It is triadic, its structure grounded in two irrefutable facts about the human condition—one related to the constitution of the self, the other to the nature of history. The first fact is that human beings consist of matter, mind, and spirit, an amalgamation that generates conflicts within the self and with the world. The second is that humans are situated in time, existing in the present, remembering the past, anticipating the future. In regard to the first triad, the Edenic imagination implies the presence of painful disjunctions and of a longing to transcend them; in regard to the second, it includes the consciousness of living in a moment between moments; it retains a memory, however slight, of a reality before the Fall, combined with an intuition, however faint, of the possibility of return—to home, childhood, innocence, Eden. Older than recorded history, this pattern undergirds the daily rhythm of leaving home in the morning, working through the day, and returning in the evening. It is reflected in ancient religions, including Judaism and Christianity, and in landmarks of Western literature, notably *The Odyssey*, *The Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, *The Prelude*, *Ulysses*, and *Four Quartets*.

Eliot's association of his dialectical imagination with religion was strengthened by the fact that, after his conversion, he was forced to defend his faith to his family. After his mother's death in 1929, his brother accused him of having dishonored their parents by abandoning Unitarianism. Henry also criticized him for writing "blasphemous" poems, including "The Hippopotamus" and "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service." On New Year's Day 1936, Eliot responded to this rebuke, explaining that his St. Louis childhood, his university education, and his early poetry had all been part of a dimly understood religious quest. He now thinks of his identification with England and Christianity not as a betrayal of his origins, but as a return to them. His conversion was simply an extension of his previous interests, including Sanskrit, Indic literature, and Bergsonian philosophy. He confesses that he had been propelled all along by a "religious preoccupation." In his early poems, what would emerge as his religious preoccupation is primarily psychological (clarifying the self); in his philosophical essays, it is

epistemological (finding the truth); in his postwar poems and criticism, it is mythic and cultural (understanding our origins); and in his late poetry, it is Edenic (returning to God). This development can be understood as a series of questions: who am I? what is true? where are we? how can I return?

Eliot's Edenic imagination is most fully expressed in his last poem, "Little Gidding," (1942), which loops back dialectically—first, to the beginning of *Four Quartets*, and second, to his earliest unpublished prose. In the context of his late work, his early poems, as illustrated by "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" (1911), can be seen as a violent prefiguration of the end of "Little Gidding." His mid-life sequence, *Ash-Wednesday* (1927-1930), which he referred to several times as his personal *Vita Nuova*,<sup>2</sup> conveys a strenuous attempt to discipline his emotions and prepare for the homeward journey. Reading Eliot's early poems with an awareness of his Edenic imagination reveals that his darkest poems and most skeptical prose are part of a pattern of return that is essentially religious. This pattern is reflected in individual poems, in philosophical arguments, and in the overall shape of his life.

Structurally and thematically, the Edenic pattern is at the heart of *Four Quartets*. Organized around the movement of the seasons and the circulation of the elements, the four poems are dialectically related each to each and each to all, and they move forward by looping back. The concluding scene of the last, "Little Gidding," returns to the opening scene of the first, "Burnt Norton." "Burnt Norton" begins in a garden in time, a rose garden in the Cotswolds, which leads to a lost garden that exists "in my mind" as a memory, an echo of a continuing reality. Resonant with echoes of Eden, this scene not only leads back to the lost garden, but points forward to "Little Gidding," with its garden of fiery roses where all shall be well.

In the first section of "Burnt Norton," the garden is identified with "our first world."

Footfalls echo in the memory  
Down the passage which we did not take  
Towards the door we never opened  
Into the rose-garden. (117)

The experience in the garden is transient, an "unattended moment, the moment in and out of time." Being in time, a part of history, it can be and has been lost, but it can be redeemed, at least temporarily. And it grounds hope by stimulating "hints followed by guesses" (136). Human beings, who "cannot bear very much reality" (118), have been and will be expelled, but having experienced the timeless moment, they know they are homeless and can imagine the possibility of return.

The garden in the final scene of "Little Gidding" is remarkably similar to that of "Burnt Norton," except that instead of a moment of immediacy triggered by the memory of a "might-have-been" world, it is a vision emerging from experience that includes not only roses, but fires, not only the tongues of the Holy Spirit, but those of German bombers. The speaker reveals that this garden is both familiar and alien, both an end and a beginning. Like the garden in "Burnt Norton," it has a gate, but instead of "the first gate," it is "the unknown, remembered gate." Unknown because when we were in "our first world," we were in a state of immediacy in which knowing was subsumed in being. Remembered because as we enter, we find that we have been there before. This place (both here and nowhere), again like the garden of "Burnt Norton," contains inklings of Eden—laughter, music, birds, children, flowers, apple-trees, waterfalls. All are silent or hidden, half-heard, unseen, there and not-there; experienced, but not seen or heard, touched or tasted.

The gate to the garden of "Little Gidding" is inscribed with a quotation that underscores the connection of the Edenic experience with hiddenness.

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time. (145)

The first line is from the fourteenth-century English classic, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the thesis of which is that there is a reality that cannot be penetrated by intellect, but that can be known through love and through listening. To pass through the "unknown, remembered" gate, one must accept the idea that the divine is cloaked in mystery. This mystical notion, essential in the *Quartets*, takes us back to the beginning of Eliot's work, where in one of his notebook fragments, he refers to something "Hidden under the heron's wing" (*Inventions* 82). In a later poem, he varies the image, associating the hidden presence with the still point.

O hidden under the dove's wing, hidden in the turtle's breast, ...  
At the still point of the turning world. O hidden. (86)

Julian of Norwich, one of Eliot's guests in the garden of "Little Gidding," associates the still point with the presence of God: "After this I saw the whole Godhead concentrated...in a single point.... He is in all things.... God is the focal point of everything" (80).

Although "Little Gidding" returns the visitor to the roses glimpsed beyond the "first gate" in "Burnt Norton", the last garden is not a replica of the first, because the first precedes the experience of evil, and the latter both includes and transcends it. The entrance fee costs "not less than everything"; the reward is a vision of an image that promises that "all shall be well" and

All manner of thing shall be well  
When the tongues of flame are in-folded  
Into the crowned knot of fire  
And the fire and the rose are one. (145)

The vision of tongues of flame as the petals of a rose is Eliot's richest dialectical image, and as the culmination of *Four Quartets*, it suggests the complexity of "our first world," one that both contains and reconciles voices from all times and places (Brooker, "Fire and Rose").

The final scene in "Little Gidding" not only returns the reader to the first scene in *Four Quartets*, but to the beginning of Eliot's career nearly thirty years earlier. In "The validity of artificial distinctions," an essay written for his 1914 Oxford tutorial on the idealist philosopher F. H. Bradley, Eliot clearly reveals the structure of his own thinking to be dialectical. In regard to epistemology, he says that the quest for truth requires returning to the place "from which we started." He compares the epistemological quest to reading a book. To return to the starting point, the traveler must close the book, keeping only what is in his mind or scribbled on the flyleaf. This is the pattern that was to flower into Eliot's Edenic imagination. His early philosophical papers contain abundant evidence of dialectical thinking as a way of dealing with contradictions. Frustrated by his tendency to see both sides of a question simultaneously, he was nevertheless able to formulate an epistemological test—"returning to the exact point from which we started"—and to apply that criterion with a degree of integrity that led him to change his vocation from philosophy to poetry.<sup>3</sup>

The notion of embarking on a dialectical journey ending in a return is a major motif in Eliot's first important poems, written in 1909-1911 and thus roughly contemporaneous with his work in philosophy. The primary conflict in these poems is between mind and world, and the return is a homecoming that simultaneously posits and derides the Edenic ideal. The clearest early example of the pattern that was to develop into the Edenic imagination can be seen in "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," written in 1911 in Paris where Eliot was attending the lectures of Henri Bergson. Structurally, several principles—narrative, dialectical, and musical—are used concurrently. The narrative principle is firmly established by the ticking of a clock moving

from midnight to half past four in the morning and by the footsteps of a man who is homeward bound, moving through seedy streets to an upstairs flat with a bed and a toothbrush. The dialectical principle is reflected in a running dialogue between his consciousness and the world through which he moves. This is also a dialogue between past and present, and intellect and feeling. Philosophically, it is the debate between matter and memory outlined by Bergson, and between realism and idealism defended, respectively, by Bertrand Russell and F. H. Bradley, thinkers whose views Eliot would study for the next five years. The musical structure, announced in the title, supports both the narrative and dialectical elements. A rhapsody is a romantic musical genre that includes emotion and improvisation. In this composition, the music includes a steady beat reflecting the mechanical world of science and an improvised melody reflecting the mental state of the persona. The beat is established by the ticking of the clock, the spacing of the gas lamps, and the footsteps of the persona, the melody by his memories and desires. The poem is cast as a conversation. On one side, the street lamps comment on what is perceivable through the senses:

The street-lamp said, "Regard that woman  
Who hesitates towards you in the light of the door  
Which opens on her like a grin." (14)

On the other side, the mind throws up a "crowd of twisted things" and "Midnight shakes the memory / As a madman shakes a dead geranium" (14). Finally, the night-walker reaches home.

"The bed is open; the tooth-brush hangs on the wall,  
Put your shoes at the door, sleep, prepare for life."

The last twist of the knife. (16)

This disturbing conclusion describes an anti-Eden of guilt, violence, and death.

The conclusion of "Rhapsody" points to the larger canvas of history and myth in poems such as *The Waste Land* and "Sweeney among the Nightingales." The epigraph of "Sweeney" is the scream of the returning warrior Agamemnon being slaughtered in his bath, the "last twist of the knife" coming from his wife and her lover (35). From a bar in twentieth-century South America to the prehistoric hill fortress of Mycenae, the primal scream reverberates back across three millenia of human history, and then forward to the contemporary "sacred wood" of ritualistic slaughter in the forests of Verdun and the Somme.

In the mid-1920s, a decade into his life in London, Eliot underwent a

spiritual crisis that led to his baptism into the Anglican Church in June 1927. Paradoxically, this moment of identification with England is also a moment of nostalgia for America. The commitment to Europe and the awareness of exile is caught in *Ash-Wednesday* I and VI (1927, 1930). As the beginning of the penitential season in the Christian calendar, Ash Wednesday requires a double turning, a backward turning to face one's sins, and a forward turning towards a *vita nuova*. The backward glance in Eliot's poem is bifocal, in which sorrow for sin is associated with the European decade, and nostalgia for home with America before the war and Eliot's marriage. The Edenic impulse to move forward by turning back is focused on his "first world"—St. Louis (childhood, home, family), Cape Ann (youth, the sea), and Boston (first love, Emily Hale); most of all, given that these poems were contemporaneous with his conversion, all of these returns coalesce as a turning (re-turning) to God (divine love).

Although Eliot had been away from America for over a decade, it is clear from *Ash-Wednesday* that he had left part of himself there, a part that he longed to reclaim. The working title for the first poem was "All Aboard for Natchez / Cairo and St. Louis," the conductor's call for his trips home to St. Louis during his Harvard years. The line became part of an act by an American blackface vaudeville team, Moran and Mack, known as the "The Two Black Crows." Eliot owned the recording and played it for I. A. Richards in Cambridge (Richards 6). The first line of the poem establishes the exilic voice. It is a translation of the first line of Guido Cavalcanti's "Ballata, written in exile at Saranza" (1300). Addressing the ballad, Cavalcanti asks it to take his message to his lady (both his beloved and his city), "Because I do not hope to return ever" to Florence. But although the penitent does not hope to "re-turn," "turn again," he aches with longing for a lost world—the Eliot family summer home on Cape Ann. In the time of "tension between dying and birth," the penitent sees

From the wide windows towards the granite shore  
The white sails still fly seaward, seaward flying  
Unbroken wings

And the lost heart stiffens and rejoices  
In the lost lilac and the lost sea voices  
And the weak spirit quickens to rebel  
For the bent golden-rod and the lost sea smell[.] (66)

The Eliot home, "The Downs," had big picture windows overlooking golden-rod towards the granite shore, where the white sails passed all summer long. Eliot and his brother spent much time sailing and visiting with

the fishermen at Gloucester. These remembered images, situated between dying and rebirth, recall childhood, family, home, the sea. And throughout *Ash-Wednesday*, a lost love, a lady on the shore, calls him back to America. As Gordon (233-54) and Schuchard (148-61) have persuasively argued, the lady is both Emily Hale, the girl he left behind in 1914, with whom his friendship was renewed in 1927, and the Virgin Mary. Emily Hale was with Eliot when he visited the rose garden of Burnt Norton in 1934, and there, she is explicitly associated with "our first world." Eliot did return to America, but in following the dream of *Ash-Wednesday*, he discovered that he was following the "deception of the thrush" (118), for as Harry says in *The Family Reunion*, "The instinct to return to the point of departure / And start again as if nothing had happened" is an impossible dream (249). The return to Eden does not consist of replicating the past, but of realizing a new world that both includes the past and transcends it, as in the vision at the end of "Little Gidding."

The richest realization of the Edenic pattern for Eliot, however, was not in art, but in life. His trajectory was the opposite of Oedipus's—not a tragedy, but a comedy, moving from isolation to marriage, misery to happiness, despair to faith. His mortal remains, appropriately, rest in the village from which his ancestors sailed for America in the seventeenth century. "In my beginning is my end...In my end is my beginning" (123, 129).

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## NOTES

1. By Johns Hopkins University Press and Faber and Faber. The Eliot materials given to Princeton University by Emily Hale will remain sequestered as a condition of the gift.

2. In letters written in May and June of 1930 (to be included in volume four), Eliot refers several times to *Ash-Wednesday* as a feeble attempt to write his *Vita Nuova*.

3. For Eliot's early philosophical papers there is no printed edition. "The validity of artificial distinctions" will be included in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: 1905-1918*, edited by Jewel Spears Brooker and Ronald Schuchard, forthcoming from Johns Hopkins UP.

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THE "CENTRE OF INTENSITY":  
T. S. ELIOT'S REASSESSMENT OF BAUDELAIRE  
IN 1910-1911 PARIS

John Morgenstern

Two years before Eliot embarked on his formative year in Paris, Arthur Symons's volume *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* transported his imagination to France. Implicitly recalling his experience reading the French Symbolists, Eliot once claimed that "in poetry you can, now and then, penetrate into another country, so to speak, before your passport has been issued or your ticket taken" (*OPP* 24). At least in his verse experimentation, from the time of his discovery of Symons's book in the Harvard Union library in December 1908, Eliot looked beyond the squares of Cambridge to the *grandes places* of Paris. "Ce n'est pas un accident qui m'avait conduit à Paris. Depuis plusieurs années," Eliot wrote in 1944, "la France représentait surtout, à mes yeux, la poésie" ("What France Means").

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