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# 'The Unheard Music': T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* and John of the Cross

The influence of John of the Cross on *Four Quartets* by T.S. Eliot is acknowledged by many Eliot scholars.<sup>1</sup> It is presumed, however, that this influence does not extend beyond the obvious allusions made by the poet to the Spanish mystic, and in some cases the discussion is even confused or misleading. Since Eliot first discovered John's works while at Harvard, was still interested enough to cite them as a 'devotional monument' in 'Lancelot Andrewes' (1926) and to quote them ironically in an epigraph to *Sweeney Agonistes* (1926-7), as well as to review an abridged version of John's works in 1934, it is more than probable that he continued reading John in depth and with understanding.<sup>2</sup> Dame Helen Gardner tells us that when Eliot was writing 'East Coker' (1940) he used E. Allison Peers's translation of John's works.<sup>3</sup> Eliot's preoccupation with Christian mysticism is evident throughout the corpus of his religious works. *Murder in the Cathedral*, for example, presents the inward journey of the protagonist, as he picks his way among ever more subtle and dangerous temptations towards his goal in 'the night of God.' In *Four Quartets* the influence of several Christian mystics, particularly of John of the Cross, is strikingly evident.<sup>4</sup>

In Christian mysticism there are two traditions, based on opposing schools of theology: kataphatic theology, which uses concepts to make statements about God; and apophatic theology, which denies the efficacy of applying any human concepts to God. From the first proceeds the mysticism of affirmation; from the second negative mysticism. Although the two traditions coincide on many fundamentals, such as the proposition that God is love, their conflicting features are discernible in various schools of spirituality. The second tradition has had many more followers than the first, because of the extensive and lasting influence of an unknown fifth-century writer who claimed to be Paul's convert, Dionysius the Areopagite (Pseudo-Dionysius). In the West the most notable mystics in this line of descent are the Victorines, Albert, Aquinas (who had reservations), Bonaventure, Eckhart, Tauler, Suso, Denys the Carthusian, and John of the Cross. Dante also felt the influence. The mysticism of affirmation, on the other hand, is evident in the works of Augustine, Gregory, Bernard, Francis of Assisi, Julian of Norwich, and others. Although Clement of Alexandria and Augustine had already

divided the mystical ascent into three stages, Dionysius made the tripartite scheme famous: purgation, illumination, and union – or a journey through darkness to light.<sup>5</sup> Traces of this scheme are discernible in *Four Quartets*.

Eliot's reading in mysticism and his own experiences undoubtedly complemented each other, so that his adaptation of sources came naturally, pervading the fabric of the poem completely yet unobtrusively. Balachandra Rajan defines *Four Quartets* as 'both a meditative poem of the mind and a heroic poem of the human journey.'<sup>6</sup> I propose to show that the meditation is largely directed by John of the Cross and that Eliot's version of the mystical journey follows from it. As briefly as possible I shall study the style and conception of the poem in relation to *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *Dark Night of the Soul*, *Spiritual Canticle*, and *Living Flame of Love*.<sup>7</sup> I shall first discuss John's style and the general features of his mystical writing that bear upon *Four Quartets*. Second, aspects of the three stages in the mystical journey will be noted in the five-part structure of each quartet. Third, concepts, images, and symbols – commonplaces in mystical writing based on Scripture or Greek philosophy and abounding in John – will be discussed as they appear in Eliot's poem.

Dionysian mysticism, which John acknowledges (*Ascent*, 2.8.6; *Canticle*, 13 and 14.16), emphasizes the way of unknowing and negation to attain the ineffable God. In *Ascent* and *Dark Night* John couches his stern teaching of total self-denial in usually reasoned and uncompromising, dialectic, sometimes denunciatory style, frequently redundant and profuse. In *Canticle* and *Living Flame* he prefers a lyrical, impassioned, even ecstatic style. Throughout, his writing is enriched with images and rhetorical figures. Drawn to this negative mysticism by his own temperament and earlier negative view of the world (*The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men*), Eliot adopts John's uncompromising tone mainly in the exhortations of the third movements and the sombre and caustic analyses of the human condition in the first part of the fifth movements. His two main styles – plain discursive and quietly lyrical – appear in passages that convey, respectively, reasoned meditation and admonition, or contemplative affectivity and devotion.

A view of the world of sense as delusive and dying creates a sustained melancholy in *Four Quartets*. It contends with the blind faith and hope urged by the underlying mystical doctrine. As a result of this tension *Four Quartets* never attains the ecstatic tone of John's lyrical passages, though the speaker is almost visionary in 'Little Gidding,' iv, and the concluding passages of 'Burnt Norton' and 'Little Gidding.' This absence of ecstasy ensures Eliot's objectivity, and while he regularly varies his style from discursive to lyrical, the tone is characteristically detached and cool. In describing the experience of mystical love he never abandons the control of reason.

Like Augustine and Aquinas, John centres his mystical teaching in the Trinity (*Canticle* and *Living Flame*), and Eliot's poem also assumes a Trinitarian basis. The Incarnation, Passion, and Redemption are focal points in John's works, as they are in *Four Quartets*. Furthermore, a line of spiritual progress is discernible in the poem: 'Burnt Norton' opens with spiritual immaturity and 'Little Gidding' closes with the imagistic depiction of the transforming union and beatific vision. 'Burnt Norton' contains the entire journey in synoptic form, which each subsequent quartet repeats with variations. Eliot relies on allusion and association linking the quartets to trace the forward movement of the questing soul. He revolves around his subject, gathering accretions as he goes.

The three traditional stages (or ways) in the mystical life are characterized by the degree of perfection achieved respectively by beginners, proficient, and the perfect. Those who belong to the first group, aware of the divine call to perfect love, enjoy a first fervour and the sweetness of God's presence. These passing 'sensible consolations' support God's invitation to self-surrender and ascent to the second stage. But they are only glimpses of the bliss discovered at the end of the journey. At the first stage the person must diligently rid himself of his imperfections, lay aside all earthly attachments, and practise all the virtues. His mental prayer changes from discursive meditation to a simple form of contemplation. In John's terms, he has begun the ascent of Mount Carmel. The purifications which he undergoes are called 'active,' because, helped by grace, he deliberately undertakes them himself. This phase consequently is called the 'active dark night' of the (external) senses and the spirit (internal senses: understanding, memory, and will). John describes it in *Ascent*, 1.1.3, and *Dark Night*, 1.1-7.

Those in the second group pass into a phase in which God takes over the further purification of their souls, as they remain passive in his hands. While receiving infused (dark) contemplation, they endure frightening interior desolation, often accompanied by illness or other misfortunes, and are drawn thereby completely out of themselves towards the infinite holiness. Intermittently, through this darkness, God illumines them with divine light. This stage is called the 'passive dark night' of the senses (*Dark Night*, 1.8-14) and of the spirit (*ibid.*, 2.1-25). Its final phase is spiritual betrothal, a period of great peace, though terror and anguish still threaten (*Canticle*, 12-26). The second stage may last for years.

The members of the last group, the perfect, have entered the transforming union, or spiritual marriage. John describes it in *Canticle*, 27-39, and in *Living Flame*. In this state the person has passed over into God and lives, thinks, and loves only with his Spirit. All four books, written for friends and disciples, are prose commentaries on lyric poems in which John sings of his own mystical experiences.<sup>8</sup>

These three stages are apparent in the five-part structure of *Four*

*Quartets*. The principal speaker is the one undertaking the journey, or at least reflecting on it. The pattern unfolds as follows: In the first movements the scene symbolizes the involvement with this world that must be relinquished by the beginner. In the rose-garden of 'Burnt Norton,' 'our first world,' the seeker perceives 'water out of sunlight,' or the early sensible consolations. In retrospect these seem unreal and to cling to them would be to 'follow / The deception of the thrush.' In 'East Coker' history, marriage, family life, and festivities of earthly attachment all end in the death of renunciation. 'Dry Salvages' presents the worry, fears, and cares of this life that impede the soul's free release in God. In 'Little Gidding' the senses and the intellect, dearer to man than material possessions, must also be sacrificed. John sums up his numerous injunctions to total self-denial: 'The soul cannot come to this union ... without great detachment from every created thing and sharp mortification' (*Dark Night*, 2.24.4). Renunciation of this world and of self is the subject of the first movements.

The second movements present the mystical goal to the proficient and the increasingly arduous way towards it. In 'Burnt Norton' it is 'the still point,' experienced as 'inner freedom' and '*Erhebung*,' giving an awareness of both ecstasy over this new life and horror over the old. The fleeting quality of his new awareness casts the seeker back into time, with only the memory left to sustain or torment him. In 'East Coker' it is the 'vortex,' or the end of the journey, achieved by struggling through the 'dark wood' of the passive dark night. In 'Dry Salvages' it is 'the last annunciation' or summons of death and the 'one Annunciation' of Mary's *fiat* uttered in complete abandonment to God. In 'Little Gidding' it is destruction of all things, signifying man's refusal to sacrifice, and the restoration of the spirit by the 'refining fire.' John writes of the assaults of the Holy Spirit and man's longing for death in *Living Flame*, 1.29-30. Complete death to self and mystical fulfilment are the subject of the second movements.

In the third movements mentors utter their stern lessons. In all schools of mysticism, both eastern and western, the role of the mentor is essential. John is very emphatic about the duties of 'spiritual masters,' castigating ignorance and insisting on 'knowledge and discretion' (*Living Flame*, 3.29). Instruction and encouragement are essential to lead the soul 'to spiritual poverty and detachment, which is the dark night' (*Ascent*, 2.22.17). In 'Burnt Norton' and 'East Coker' John himself is the principal mentor, supported by Krishna in 'Dry Salvages' and Julian of Norwich in 'Little Gidding.' The first three quartets set the lesson in the imperative mood: 'Descend lower'; 'be still and wait without hope'; 'do not think of the fruit of the action. / Fare forward.' In 'Little Gidding' the mentor defines the three conditions of life: attachment, detachment, and indifference. Purified love (detachment) - distinguished from earthly attachment

— leads to liberation. Indifference is sinful lack of zeal, or sloth — ‘unflowering.’ It is not the supernatural caring and not caring of *Ash Wednesday*. John insists on detachment from creatures (*Ascent*, 3.20) and from spiritual consolations (*Dark Night*, 2.1–4). Liberty of spirit then prevails (*ibid.*, 2.1.2). Hence the third movements are clearly didactic, showing the seeker’s need for guidance throughout his journey.

The fourth movements introduce the patron of each quartet. In the spiritual life it is customary to place oneself under the special patronage of God (as Trinity, or Saviour, or Spirit), of Mary, or of a saint. Frequently, a special name is taken to signify this patronage, as at baptism, confirmation, or (formerly) religious profession. Eliot’s patrons are the three divine Persons and Mary. John describes the role of the Trinity in the mystical life: the Trinity comes to dwell in the soul ‘when the understanding is divinely illumined in the wisdom of the Son, and the will is made glad in the Holy Spirit, and the Father, with His power and strength, absorbs the soul in the embrace and abyss of His sweetness’ (*Living Flame*, 1.15, 2nd redaction). He goes on to describe the individual action of each Person in the soul: the ‘sweet burn’ of the Holy Spirit, the ‘soft hand’ of the ‘merciful and omnipotent Father,’ and the ‘delicate touch’ of the Son (*ibid.*, 2.2–20). The Trinity, manifesting itself less ecstatically in *Four Quartets*, assumes the traditional appropriation of functions: the Father as Creator (Aquinas’s concept based on Aristotle’s unmoved mover) appears in ‘Burnt Norton.’<sup>9</sup> Eliot modifies the traditional terminology by designating the Father as ‘the light ... / At the still point of the turning world.’ This is sound theology, for Augustine calls the Father the ‘eternal light’ and ‘the principle of all divinity.’<sup>10</sup> Likewise the Son, as Redeemer and Physician (the latter function derived from the Church Fathers), appears in ‘East Coker’; and the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier, descending in tongues of fire (described in Acts) presides over ‘Little Gidding.’ The Virgin Mary reigns over the same movement in ‘Dry Salvages,’ as protectress of seamen, suggesting Bernard’s devotion to Mary’s intercession.<sup>11</sup> In the fourth movement the poet anchors each respective quartet in customary supernatural patronage.

The fifth movements, opening with a meditation on the limits of human expression in the parameter of time, attempt to express the ineffable as experienced by the perfect. In ‘Burnt Norton’ it is the timelessness of God: ‘Love is itself unmoving, / Only the cause and end of movement, / Timeless.’ In ‘East Coker’ it is a fleeting view of the transforming union: ‘A further union, a deeper communion.’ In ‘Dry Salvages’ it is the coming of the timeless into time, or the ‘Incarnation. / Here the impossible union / Of spheres of existence’ — the perfect union of humanity with divinity. In ‘Little Gidding’ it is ‘the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling,’ leading to the beatific vision, where ‘the fire and the rose are one.’ John describes this union as ‘the enkindling and transformation of

this flame in the soul [that does] not cause pain,' because it burns only in 'the beatific state' (*Canticle*, 39.14, 2nd redaction). The fifth movement shows the soul surmounting the limits of words to approximate the language of pure love. John writes that he hesitated before commencing *Living Flame*, because 'words commonly fail to describe [interior things] since spirit transcends sense' (*Living Flame*, Prologue.1). Eliot struggles with poetic expression itself, and the ineffability of his subject augments his artistic problem.

While the structure of *Four Quartets* encompasses John's three stages, Eliot's choice of concepts, images, and symbols suggests even more clearly his preoccupation with John's school of mysticism. The dominant concepts are time, the call, and the state of unknowing.

The concept of time is fundamental to *Four Quartets*, first appearing in 'Burnt Norton,' I and II. The mentor in *The Cloud of Unknowing* writes that the 'stirrings' of God come moment by moment in time and make the soul 'suddenly and perfectly [forget] all created things.'<sup>12</sup> These stirrings are similar to Eliot's timeless moments. His speaker's inability to locate his experience in time reflects John's apophatic way: 'This prayer ... belongs not to time ... [Its] effects are the lifting up of the spirit [Eliot's *Erhebung*] to the heavenly intelligence, and its withdrawal and abstraction from all things' (*Ascent*, 2.14.11).<sup>13</sup> The moments of illumination need no redemption, for God dwells in an eternal present, directing the movements of the soul, giving it flashes of timeless rapture to draw it to the still point, himself. Everything else is worthless: 'Ridiculous the waste sad time / Stretching before and after' ('Burnt Norton,' v).

Closely linked with the concept of time is that of the divine call, which constitutes a principal theme of *Four Quartets*. Man experiences God's call in time and history. In his Prologue to *Ascent* John writes of God's initiative in leading souls to himself, and later he states that 'God calls [them] into the wilderness' (*Living Flame*, 3.34); but the way lies through the dark nights of 'privation and purgation' (*Ascent*, 1.1.4). As Eliot's protagonist moves through the scenes and reflections of *Four Quartets*, he too experiences difficulties and failures. With disgust he turns from the 'place of disaffection' ('Burnt Norton,' III) and the limited and falsifying 'knowledge derived from experience' ('East Coker,' II). Saddened by failure, he ruminates: 'For us, there is only the trying' ('East Coker,' v); and again: 'For most of us, this is the aim / Never here to be realised' ('Dry Salvages,' v). But triumph is finally asserted: 'With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling / We shall not cease from exploration / And the end ... / Will be to arrive where we started' ('Little Gidding,' v), namely in God, who made us. In *Four Quartets* Eliot distinguishes between those who ignore the call, seeking vain and idle ends, and those who struggle to follow it. He does this most clearly in 'East Coker,' II and III, and 'Dry Salvages,' v.

Adhering to the apophatic tradition, Eliot integrates the concept of unknowing. He writes: 'But to what purpose / ... I do not know,' and 'I cannot say where' ('Burnt Norton,' I, II). Not knowing where God is leading it, the soul must follow blindly. For Eliot, as for John, flashes of divine light must remain fleeting, since 'human kind / Cannot bear very much reality' ('Burnt Norton,' I). It is the negation of intellect to which he returns in 'Little Gidding,' I: 'You are not here to verify, / Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity / Or carry report. You are here to kneel.' Kneeling is an act of submission. Central concepts in John's doctrine are '*nescivi*,' unknowing (*Canticle*, 17.11), and '*nada*,' dispossession. His drawing of the Mount of Perfection shows three roads; only the middle road reaches the summit. It is marked by six *nadas*. To the left are the joys of heaven, to the right the good things of earth, all of which must be renounced. Knowledge is the first heavenly pleasure to be discarded.

These concepts are supported by numerous images and combine with traditional mystical symbols. Among the images I shall discuss only ascent-descent, and light-darkness. The significant symbols are childhood and garden, journey and ladder, still point, voice and fire.

The image of ascent-descent comes to Eliot from John as well as from Herakleitos. For the Spaniard it is the paradox of the journey up the Mount of Perfection. Paraphrasing Luke 14:11, he writes: 'For communications which are indeed of God have this property, that they humble the soul and at the same time exalt it. For upon this road to go down is to go up, and to go up, to go down, for he that humbles himself is exalted and he that exalts himself is humbled' (*Dark Night*, 2.18.2). Eliot borrows this paradox in 'Neither ascent nor decline' ('Burnt Norton,' II), and 'the way up is the way down' ('Dry Salvages,' III). The mentor's admonition, 'Descend lower' ('Burnt Norton,' III), is couched in images found in *Ascent*, 1, 2, and 3, where the emptying of the 'world of sense,' 'fancy,' and 'spirit' in the active dark night is described in painful detail. Eliot's diction, 'Desiccation,' 'Evacuation,' and 'Inoperancy' ('Burnt Norton,' III), conveys the totality of this stripping of self.

John's universal image of darkness derives from Dionysius and recurs in Eliot's 'World not world ... / Internal darkness, deprivation' ('Burnt Norton,' III). Eliot further applies the image in 'East Coker,' III, when stating that the great men of this world 'all go into the dark.' John also refers to the 'great men of letters and of influence, and all others who live yonder, with the world, and are eager about their ambitions and their prelacies ... [whose] end ... will be very bitter' (*Ascent*, 2.7.12). The 'vacant' darkness enveloping these people differs from the darkness surrounding the spiritual man. This latter darkness in the beginner, according to John, signifies the emptiness caused in the soul by faith, hope, and charity (*Ascent*, 2.6.2), a passage which Eliot paraphrases as 'the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting' ('East Coker,'

III). John reminds the soul that it must wait and 'learn to be still in God' (*Ascent*, 2.15.2,5), and Eliot: 'I said to my soul, be still, and wait' ('East Coker,' III). God, writes John, is 'dark night to the soul in this life' (*Ascent*, 1.2.1), and Eliot's seeker is waiting for the 'darkness of God' ('East Coker,' III). At this stage God is leading the proficient in passive contemplation, which John calls 'this blessed night,' because it prepares the person for the divine light (*Dark Night*, 2.13.10-11). Eliot's three supporting images of darkness – theatre, underground, etherized unconsciousness – reinforce the visual quality of this passivity. At the end of the journey, as Eliot perceives, God's darkness will turn into light: 'So the darkness shall be the light' ('East Coker,' III), and John: 'For although ... God is as dark a night to the soul as is faith ... [He] begins to illumine the soul by supernatural means with the rays of His divine light' (*Ascent*, 2.2.1). These images of ascent-descent and light-darkness underline the paradoxical nature of the journey.

Childhood and garden are Eliot's first symbols, appearing in 'Burnt Norton,' I and V, and recurring in 'East Coker,' III, and 'Little Gidding,' V. Traditionally they signify inexperience and security. The children laughing among the leaves are intimately associated with the brief illumination of 'water out of sunlight.' Water symbolizes grace and purification, and the lotus contemplation, all of these being the object of the beginner's striving. 'Sudden in a shaft of sunlight' marks the timeless moment of divine favour, or sensible consolation, which carries the beginner forward. It is quickly obscured by the cloud, that presages the 'crying shadow' in the desert ('Burnt Norton,' V), and the other images of darkness and agony to follow. The speaker remembers graces received and cherishes the places associated with them: 'rose-garden,' 'arbour where the rain beat,' 'draughty church at smokefall' ('Burnt Norton,' II). Glimpses and echoes of the early experience linger with him. They are 'Not lost,' but point 'to the agony / Of death and birth' ('East Coker,' III) which he is enduring. Significantly these echoes of 'laughter in the garden' strengthen him for the harsh lesson to be presently enunciated. John uses childhood as a symbol for the first stage, observing that God weans beginners from their childish ways and sensible consolations (*Dark Night*, 1.1.2-3). He also recommends returning to a place where God formerly bestowed a spiritual favour, to give thanks and praise for it (*Ascent*, 3.42.3).

At the end of 'Little Gidding' Eliot reintroduces the children among the leaves. We are reminded that this is the garden where the journey began. The shrubbery has now become an apple-tree, signifying transformation. John's description of the mystical marriage introduces the apple-tree. In this state the Spouse reveals his secrets to the perfected soul, 'beneath the apple-tree,' which is an amalgam of Eve's tree and 'the Tree of the Cross' (*Canticle*, 28.1-4). The first experience in 'our first world,' the

rose-garden, now culminates in union in the mystical garden, which, according to John, is God himself: 'For, after the soul has been for some time the Bride of the Son of God, in love which is sweet and perfect, God calls her and sets her in His flowering garden for the consummation of this most happy estate of marriage with Him, wherein is effected such union of the two natures and such communication of the Divine nature to the human, that, while neither of them changes its being, each of them appears to be God' (*Canticle*, 27.3). John's garden crowns the summit of his Mount and is the desired goal of every beginner.

The mystical journey leads the seeker out of spiritual immaturity and deceptive security through desolation. In John's works the road and the journey are the central symbols, repeated with great frequency. Eliot stresses the insecurity of the venture: 'For the pattern is new in every moment / And every moment is a new and shocking / Valuation of all we have been' ('East Coker,' II). He then depicts the perils encountered: 'dark wood,' 'bramble,' 'grimpen' [marsh] with 'no secure foothold,' / And menaced by monsters.' This way lies 'in the middle.' Only 'fancy' gives light, and it is deceptive. This is John's middle road up the Mount. 'Upon this road,' he writes, 'we must ever journey in order to attain our goal; which means that we must ever be mortifying our desires and not indulging them' (*Ascent*, 1.11.6). He also warns his disciples against the deceptiveness of imagination and fancy: 'All ... imaginings must be cast out from the soul ... for they can bear no proportion to proximate means of union with God,' being helpful only to beginners (*Ascent*, 2.12.3). As Eliot concludes 'East Coker,' II, in praise of humility, so the Spaniard turns to the same subject.

John's foundation for humility is the stern admonition, part of which Eliot paraphrases in 'East Coker,' III:

In order to arrive at that which thou knowest not,  
Thou must go by a way that thou knowest not.

In order to arrive at that which thou possessest not,  
Thou must go by a way that thou possessest not.

In order to arrive at that which thou art not,  
Thou must go through that which thou art not. (*Ascent*, 1.13.11)

Eliot rightly places his paraphrase at the centre of 'East Coker,' from where it unifies all the allusions to John in *Four Quartets*. This focal position emphasizes the central meaning of the passage itself, which contains the essential Dionysian message: the total denial of human knowledge, possessions, and selfishness in favour of the divine, that immeasurably transcends the human. Traversing this unknown territory requires a type of blindness. John writes: 'God takes thy hand and guides thee in the darkness, as though thou wert blind, to an end and by a way

which thou knowest not' (*Dark Night*, 2.16.7). In the same manner Eliot begins 'East Coker,' III, with the cry of blind Samson. John encourages his followers: 'It is a road that guides and leads the soul to the perfections of union with God; which, as they are things unknown after a human manner, must be approached, after a human manner, by unknowing and by Divine ignorance. For ... Divine things and perfections are not known or understood as they are when they are being sought after and practised, but when they have been found and practised' (*Dark Night*, 2.17.7).

Throughout *Four Quartets* the images of movement, travel, seafaring, and exploring support the central symbol of the mystical journey, John's going 'by a way.' Having passed through the active dark night, or 'the one way,' and the passive dark night, 'the other [which] / Is the same, not in movement / But abstention from movement' ('Burnt Norton,' III), the seeker ends his journey at the shrine of Little Gidding, where he rests at the still point. This ineffable state is fittingly described in paradoxes of place and time: 'England and nowhere. Never and always' ('Little Gidding,' I). Here the community of past seekers, including a king broken by suffering, is ever present. Eliot's full grasp of John's meaning appears in his description of mystical prayer: 'And prayer is more / Than an order of words, the conscious occupation / Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying' ('Little Gidding,' I). Only the dead, who have finished the journey, know what prayer is.

Near the end of the journey the seeker arrives at the mystical ladder. John derives this symbol from Bernard and Aquinas, and uses it to designate the dark, illuminating contemplation of proficients. It consists of ten steps, each representing a phase experienced by the mystic. John says that the soul goes both up and down the ladder, by being both exalted by God (ascent) and humiliated over its unworthiness (descent). When it has reached 'perfect habits' (*Dark Night*, 2.18.4), action will cease, since perfect union will have taken place on the ninth step (in the garden), while the tenth leads directly to the beatific vision (*Dark Night*, 2.20.4-5). For John the still point is found at the summit of the ladder: 'And the manner of this movement in the soul, since God is immovable, is a wondrous thing, for, although in reality God moves it not, it seems to the soul that He is indeed moving; for, ... it is the soul that is renewed and moved by God ... [But] this is not because [Wisdom] moves itself, but because it is the beginning and root of all movement; remaining in itself stable' (*Living Flame*, 4.6, 2nd redaction).

In John's writing the still point is a spatial image used to describe a non-spatial reality. It is not contradictory, then, that its location should be both at the top of the mystical ladder and in the depths of the human soul. For in mounting the ladder the person is really going down into his deepest self. Here John applies the analogy of gravity. As the centre of the earth is the point of strongest attraction, so God, occupying the deepest

centre of the soul, draws the person down to himself. John writes: 'The centre of the soul is God; and, when the soul has attained to Him according to the whole capacity of its being, and according to the force of its operation, it will have reached the last and the deep[est] centre of the soul ... we can say that, as are the degrees of love of God, so are the centres, each one deeper than another, which the soul has in God' (*Living Flame*, 1.12). The deepest centre is 'the farthest point' to which the person can descend and rest (*ibid*, 13). At this point God possesses the soul in secrecy and profound stillness, untouched by other created spirits.<sup>14</sup> Eliot too locates his centre and point now in the 'heart of light' ('Burnt Norton,' I), then in 'the turning world' (*ibid*, II), and later at the top of the 'ten stairs,' where he fuses it with the journey and the ladder:

The detail of the pattern is movement,  
As in the figure of the ten stairs.  
Desire itself is movement  
Not in itself desirable;  
Love is itself unmoving,  
Only the cause and end of movement  
Timeless ... ('Burnt Norton,' v).

The companion piece in 'Dry Salvages,' v, brings the still point into history at the Incarnation: 'Here the impossible union / Of spheres of existence is actual, / Here the past and future / Are conquered, and reconciled.' This union of God and man in Christ encompasses the 'chthonic powers,' or union with the universe, a thought developed in another context by Teilhard de Chardin. Christ's journey on earth is the model for all Christian mystics. His Incarnation was a 'descent' to earth, followed by his 'ascent' to heaven. Apprehending this 'point of intersection of the timeless / With time, is an occupation for the saint' ('Dry Salvages,' v), who sees the still point in silent contemplation. Stillness and silence have been traditionally associated with the Incarnation.

The symbols of voice and fire are also closely linked with the still point and the call. The many voices heard throughout *Four Quartets* blend with the voice of eternity. Some, like the bird and the chimera, are deceptive. Others harmonize on the themes of self-denial and death. Eliot's preoccupation with words and his struggle to shape adequate utterance are manifestations of his awareness of voices. The protagonist himself speaks in varied tones. As the poet arranges and rearranges the medley of voices, listening for the effects, we realize this to be a counterpart to the harkening of the soul for mystical communications.

Although 'the voice of this Calling' derives from *The Cloud*, Eliot would have found passages in John on this subject, as the following: 'The deep and delicate voice of God ... speaks to the heart in [deep silence] in this

secret place' (*Living Flame*, 3.32), and elsewhere this voice of the Beloved 'is a spiritual voice and sound which is above all sounds and above all voices' (*Canticle*, 13 and 14.9). Following Revelation 14:2, John also compares God's voice to the sound of many waters.

Both John and Eliot give great prominence to the symbol of fire. Echoing Hebrews 12:29, they describe the Holy Spirit as a consuming fire. They also choose supporting images of sunlight, lightning, flame, white light, purgatorial fires, lamps, and dawn. In the first three quartets, the images are muted, only to burst into full display in 'Little Gidding.' Here the 'pentecostal fire' (I) vividly contrasts with the midwinter imagery supporting the numb state of the waiting soul. The assault of the Holy Spirit is rendered in IV. As in the experience of the still point ('Burnt Norton,' II), so here the speaker identifies himself with others: 'We.' The Christian world-view affirms the incursions of God into the affairs of men. In the most recent rendering of mysticism the mystic stands for all mankind in loving God and receiving his love.<sup>45</sup> For John the mystical experience was still an intensely private matter. But Eliot, the modern with a social conscience, declares his affinity with history and the human community. Mankind is consumed by either the fire of earthly desire or the fire of divine love. Love devising the torment is God's love that purifies humanity. John too describes the burning of the Spirit: 'The flame of love is ... the Holy Spirit. And this flame the soul feels within it, not only as a fire that has consumed and transformed it in sweet love, but also as a fire which burns within it and sends out flame' (*Living Flame*, 1.3). Later he writes that this flame cauterizes the soul (*ibid.*, 30), but the agony pertains only to this life. In the beatific state, he declares, God is 'a consummating and renewing fire' (*Canticle*, 39.14, 2nd redaction).

Eliot's vision of the beatific state appears in the last seven lines of 'Little Gidding.' There, in a montage of allusions to Julian, Dante, and John, he unifies the symbols of fire and rose, signifying love, with the still point. The mystical journey ends here in 'complete simplicity,' or total self-giving. Having passed through the fires of purgation, the soul is ready to go forth from this life. John writes that the love impelling the soul upward in its final flight 'burns at this time, and makes its heart to long for the Beloved, ... moves and guides it, and makes it to soar upward to its God' (*Dark Night*, 2.25.4). In heaven 'not only is [the soul] united with this fire but it has now become one living flame within it' (*Living Flame*, Prologue. 4). In 'Little Gidding,' the 'tongues of flames are in-folded / Into the crowned knot of fire,' or the individual souls are united with each other in the Godhead.

The dramatic tension in *Four Quartets* arises from the juxtaposition of mankind's failures with the persistence of the divine call. Old men's folly, Eliot states, is 'fear of possession, / Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God' ('East Coker,' II). The sestina in 'Dry Salvages,' II, voices this

struggle with failure, and in its dismal sound effects, its slow-moving rhythms and depressing images, recreates man's experience of his own nothingness. In his dejection the poet represents all men's failures, as in his journey the mystic shows forth all men's hopes. Eliot's austere and objective style derives from the nature of his subject and the paradigm he adopts, as well as from his own complex intellectual approach.

Eliot uses John of the Cross, not as a theologian, but as an eclectic poet familiar with mysticism. The scheme, concepts, images, and symbols derived from John blend in *Four Quartets* with those discovered in eastern mysticism and Greek philosophy. This fusion enhances the universal meaning of the poem. John's mystical journey does not attract many followers today. To the apophatic mysticism of Pseudo-Dionysius he added the systematization, penchant for self-scrutiny, and rigour characteristic of much sixteenth-century spiritual writing. The severity and sublimity of his doctrine are shared by the other Spanish mystics of his age. William Johnston observes that it is a 'spirituality which was valid for people of a certain time and is valid for people of a certain temperament today.'<sup>16</sup> Eliot's temperament found John of the Cross suitable as a basis for the final journey of his questing protagonist. His reliance on John is deeper and more specific than has been realized heretofore. He needed not John's lyrics but his prose works to formulate the mystical journey in his own intellectual way. As both men were poets of deep sensitivity, they responded to the theme in many identical ways. Each hearkened to the 'unheard music' ('Burnt Norton,' 1), which 'is silent to the senses and the natural faculties, [yet] ... is a most sounding solitude to the spiritual faculties' (*Canticle*, 13 and 14.26). And they perceived that all the voices of creation 'make one voice of music' (*ibid*, 27).

## NOTES

- 1 James Johnson Sweeney, '“East Coker”: A Reading,' *Southern Review*, 6 (1941) 771-91; Raymond Preston, *'Four Quartets' Rehearsed: A Commentary on T.S. Eliot's Cycle of Poems* (New York 1946); Kristian Smidt, *Poetry and Belief in the Work of T.S. Eliot* (London 1949); William Johnston, 'The Mysticism of T.S. Eliot,' in *T.S. Eliot: A Tribute from Japan*, ed Masao Hirai and E.W.F. Tomlin (Tokyo 1966), valuable for its explanation of apophatic mysticism; Audrey F. Cahill, *T.S. Eliot and the Human Predicament* (Natal 1967); David Ward, *T.S. Eliot: Between Two Worlds* (London 1973); Derek Traversi, *T.S. Eliot: The Longer Poems* (New York 1976), uniquely distinguishing between the active and the passive dark nights.
- 2 Lyndall Gordon studies Eliot's interest in mysticism in *Eliot's Early Years* (Oxford 1977). Eliot's review is 'The Mystical Doctrine of St. John of the Cross,' an abridgment of David Lewis's translation, introduction by R.H.J. Steuart (London 1934), in *Criterion*, 13 (July 1934), 709-10. The review praises the

book, but treats the reader with polite condescension: 'While very few persons ever reach a stage so advanced that they can adopt St. John of the Cross as their guide, and must be content to use more elementary manuals of meditation, there is great advantage in acquiring some notion of what are the higher stages of the contemplative life. And this convenient little book can be slipped into the pocket when leaving for a weekend or the summer holidays.' Donald Gallup, *T.S. Eliot: A Bibliography* (London 1969), p 229, points out that the review was Eliot's though erroneously signed. During the 1930s and 1940s the cult of John promoted the publication of at least six studies and biographies in Britain, not to mention translations. Robert Sencourt, a friend of Eliot, wrote a book on John of the Cross, and also an article which Eliot published in *Criterion*, 10 (July 1931), 637-53.

- 3 Helen Gardner, *The Composition of Four Quartets* (London 1978), pp 42-3.
- 4 Eliot's debt to Augustine, Bernard, Julian of Norwich, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and Dante is well known. Eliot himself admitted that he 'might have dragged in Walter Hilton and Richard Rolle' except that he did not know them as well and it might have been excessive (Gardner, p 70).
- 5 In *The Mystical Theology* Dionysius writes that the 'senses and the activities of the intellect ... and all things in this world of nothingness, or in that world of being' should be abandoned in order that one may 'be led upwards to the Ray of that divine Darkness' in mystic contemplation: *The Divine Names and the Mystical Theology*, trans. C.E. Rolt (London 1920), pp 191, 192. The scheme of the three stages is based upon a subsequent passage dealing with the spiritual ascent of Moses (p 193). Although Dionysius exerted less influence on John than on his contemporaries, the strong neoplatonic strain in his thinking lingers in John's works.
- 6 Balachandra Rajan, *The Overwhelming Question: A Study of the Poetry of T.S. Eliot* (Toronto 1976), p 136.
- 7 *The Complete Works of Saint John of the Cross*, trans and ed E. Allison Peers, 3 vols (Westminster 1945). The works are cited as *Ascent*, *Dark Night*, *Canticle*, and *Living Flame*. Eliot quotations are from *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (London 1963).
- 8 *Ascent* and *Dark Night* are both incomplete treatises on the same poem, eight 'Stanzas,' most of which are about the transforming union. The commentaries concentrate on the journey towards this union. *Ascent*, covering in part only Stanzas I-II, and then digressing to other topics, is an *exposé* of the active dark night. *Dark Night* explains Stanzas I-II, and III only sketchily, from the angle of the passive dark night. It was intended as a continuation of *Ascent*. *Canticle* comments on 'Songs Between the Soul and the Spouse' in two complete redactions. This poem resembles *Song of Songs* in many ways. *Living Flame* interprets another poem, 'Stanzas of the Soul in the Intimate Communication of Union of the Love of God.' This prose work, likewise in two redactions, is also complete. Quotations from *Canticle* and *Living Flame* are from the first redactions, except where otherwise indicated. *Canticle* describes the entire

mystical journey, while *Living Flame* treats only of the transforming union. Although the works suggest a constant progression for the seeker, in actual practice the route is usually circuitous, with advances and lapses, depending on various factors.

- 9 I borrow this idea from Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot* (London 1960), p 262: '[The] brief fourth movements celebrate successively the Unmoved Mover, the redeeming Son, the Virgin, and the Holy Ghost.'
- 10 *De Trinitate*, 4.20.27.20. Elsewhere he refers to God's 'still-standing eternity': *Confessions*, 11.11; and Julian of Norwich saw 'God in a Point': *Revelations of Divine Love*, ed Grace Warrack (London 1901), ch 11. See also *Paradiso*, 28. 16: 'Heaven and all nature, hangs upon that point.'
- 11 William Turner Levy and Victor Scherle, *Affectionately, T.S. Eliot* (Philadelphia 1968), p 121, identify the church that inspired this lyric as Notre Dame de la Gard, above Marseilles. Bernard's Homily II, 'Missus est,' speaks of Mary as the 'Star of the Sea' who guides the little vessel of the human soul through all its storms.
- 12 *The Cloud of Unknowing, by an English Mystic of the Fourteenth Century* (Westminster 1924), pp 11-12. The author was avowedly in the Dionysian tradition.
- 13 Peers adds a footnote to this passage, citing P. José de Jesús María: 'In contemplation the soul withdraws itself from the seashore, and entirely loses sight of land, in order to whelm itself in that vast sea and impenetrable abyss of the Divine Essence; hiding itself in the region of time, it enters within the most extensive limits of eternity. For the pure and simple intelligence whereinto the soul is brought in this contemplation, as was pointed out by the ancient Dionysius (*Myst. Theol.*, Chap. ii), and by our own Father [John], is not subject to time' (*Ascent*, p 124, n 2).
- 14 Edith Stein comments on this inviolate 'zone' of the soul: 'No created spirit is by itself capable of entering this enclosed garden or of looking into it': *The Science of the Cross: A Study of St. John of the Cross*, trans Hilda Graef (London 1960). She also explains the gravity analogy, p 115.
- 15 Sister Gertrudis Schinle, a contemporary hermitess, stresses this role of the contemplative in many of her writings (which are available only in German).
- 16 William Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love: Mysticism and Religion* (New York 1978), p 120.