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Dialect of the Tribe: Modes of Communication and the Epiphanic Role of Nonhuman Imagery in T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets**

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In T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* an attempt is made to investigate—often in a discursive manner— notions of time, language, and the divine. Yet the poet is hindered by certain limitations: words—as a primary vehicle of expression—collapse under the pressure, frequently sabotaging attempts at true articulation as detailed in the poem's opening quartet, *Burnt Norton*: “Words strain, / Crack and sometimes break, under the burden, / Under the tension . . .” (V: 149–51).¹ Consequently, the medium of language itself frames an apparent contradiction throughout the *Quartets*: how a contrived system can represent notions intrinsically elusive and ephemeral. This conundrum inculcates all four of the poems, making them in some ways the ironic frame of their own reference. Despite this inherent dilemma, Eliot recognized that harnessing certain imagery—both animate and inanimate—and exploiting it for its numinous qualities was indispensable to achieving his aesthetic and thematic aims. Such imagery included elements taken from the natural world which pointed beyond their own outward forms to some ideal form that lay behind them. It was an approach motivated in part by what Frye describes as the poet's concern with Heraclitean *logos zynos*—or a “common logos”—and had as its aim the participation of man in the divine.² To achieve such ends, Eliot relied on bird calls, echoes, bones, bells, and other seemingly prosaic phenomena and transformed them into conduits

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¹ T. S. Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays: 1909–1950* (Orlando: Harcourt, Brace, 1980). All subsequent quotations from *Four Quartets* in this paper reference this edition.

² Northrop Frye, *T. S. Eliot* (ed. A. Norman Jeffares; Writers and Critics Series; Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1963) 42.

HTR 108:1 (2015) 98–112

by which revelations might occur. That is, certain central images the poet adopts in *Four Quartets*—though not endowed with the capacity for human language—are nevertheless engendered with communicativeness of a uniquely numinous kind. Aligned with this notion was Eliot's belief that the way to commune with the past and with the divine was through ritual; by employing common natural objects and investing each with sacramental significance, the poet was able to evoke a temporal link with the ineffable world. It was also a means of reconciling what he perceived as the disjuncture with conventional language. By grounding the effort in an approach reminiscent of sacred Christian ritual and aesthetically portraying a new mode of communication consistent with transformative ceremony, Eliot aimed at the restoration of a past community of values. This highly distinct mode of communing came to represent its own unique type of *langue*, carrying forward thematic concerns while at the same time detailing a stylistic approach to poetic composition not prevalent in Eliot's earlier work.

Much critical investigation has focused on the nature of the imagery used in *Four Quartets* and how it is employed symbolically, including close readings of the poems by Brown,³ Childs,⁴ and Cooper.⁵ In addition, Eliot's seemingly contradictory attempts to circumvent the delimiting effects of language while exploiting this same medium for his own aesthetic and artistic purposes have been long recognized in criticism. Wolosky notes, for instance, that it is in *Four Quartets* that the trope of language, both as subject and as mode of representation, becomes the center of mediation and where ambivalence toward language is most pronounced.⁶ She adds that rather than appealing to so faulty an instrument, Eliot attempts linguistic patterns in the poem that imply a mode of language based on a Christian hierarchy of values which points to a state "beyond language that finds fullest figuration in linguistic defeat."⁷ Similarly, Moody describes the Dantescan passage in *Little Gidding* II where the poet encounters a familiar "compound ghost" as a "masterpiece of dead speech"; the first half of the ensuing dialogue, he remarks, uses English "as if it were a dead language." The author adds that introducing the figure of Dante as "some dead master" implies that the language of Eliot's poem should itself be "passed through the refining fire."⁸ Notionally aligned with Mallarmé's dictum, "Le dialecte de la tribu," Eliot's stylistic approach in *Four Quartets* encompassed a poetics of what

³ Dennis Brown, "T. S. Eliot's 'Ash-Wednesday' and 'Four Quartets': Poetic Confession as Psychotherapy," *Literature and Theology* 17 (2003) 1–16, esp. 8–14.

⁴ Donald J. Childs, *T. S. Eliot: Mystic, Son, and Lover* (London: The Athlone, 1997) 186–225.

⁵ John Xiros Cooper, "Music as Symbol and Structure in Pound's 'Pisan Cantos' and Eliot's 'Four Quartets'," in *Ezra Pound and Europe* (ed. Richard Taylor and Claus Melchior; Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B. V., 1993) 177–90, esp. 182–83.

⁶ Shira Wolosky, *Language Mysticism: The Negative Way of Language in Eliot, Beckett, and Celan* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1995) 11.

⁷ Wolosky, *Language Mysticism*, 38.

⁸ David A. Moody, "Four Quartets: Music, Word, Meaning, and Value," in *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot* (ed. David A. Moody; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1994) 142–57, at 150.

Tiffany describes as the earlier French writer's "verbal sublimation, or rarefaction," yielding a substance of "lyric purity" in contrast to the unrefined "words of the tribe."⁹ Concerned with rejuvenating a purified mode of discourse, Eliot resorted to aesthetic representation that included the use of signs, or "signification": this was a set of extralinguistic tools that partially circumvented conventional language in an attempt at enhanced poetic expression. From a semiotic perspective, Veivo stresses that signs are functional and relative: that is, defined by what they do and how they relate to each other. The author adds that the sign is a mediating element that establishes a relationship between other elements.¹⁰ Ponzio expands on this by noting that the meaning of a sign is a response, an "interpretant that calls for another response, another interpretant," and concludes that this implies the dialogic nature of sign and semiosis.¹¹ For Eliot, essential, or intrinsic, meaning outran the conventional language resources available: signification, on the other hand—or the expanded notional field provided when images are portrayed as signs—presented the poet with a rhetorical device for achieving greater semantic accuracy within the confines of an adjoining linguistic framework.

Investigated below are specific isolated images in *Four Quartets* which Eliot drew from the natural world, not as mere stylistic flourishes as has been suggested by some critics, but as rhetorical devices with transformative potential equivalent in purposiveness to religious or sacramental intercession. Moody claims that the clear orientation of the series of poems is towards God's "holy fire"; in *Little Gidding*, for instance, this holy fire is Pentecostal, stirring the "dumb spirit."¹² Within the context of the four poems as a whole, such an achievement delineates the conditions necessary for the rejuvenation of the human spirit that Eliot envisioned. It was also an approach to poetic representation detailing a distinct yet precarious mode of communing with the divine whose efficacy was predicated on man's recognition of the supernatural within the temporal world—rehabilitation, to some extent, of what the poet believed had been earlier brought to perfection by Dante: a common language. Brooker regards Eliot's sense of the term "common" as exemplifying both a "universal" and an "individual pattern that is new in every moment," and was a concept that the poet felt had lost its integrity by the postmedieval period in Europe.¹³ According to Marshall, in Eliot's estimation Modernism had no answer to this "problem of disintegration."¹⁴ The analysis which follows may be viewed, in part, therefore as an attempt to elaborate upon, or extend, Cook's description of

⁹ Daniel Tiffany, *Infidel Poetics: Riddles, Nightlife, Substance* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2009) 218.

¹⁰ Harri Veivo, "The New Literary Semiotics," *Semiotica* 165 (2007) 41–55, at 44.

¹¹ Augusto Ponzio, "Sign, Dialogue, and Alterity," *Semiotica* 173 (2009) 129–54, at 130.

¹² Moody, "Four Quartets: Music, Word, Meaning, and Value," 151.

¹³ Jewel Spears Brooker, *Mastery and Escape: T. S. Eliot and the Dialectic of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1994) 160.

¹⁴ Alan Marshall, "England and Nowhere," in *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot* (ed. David A. Moody; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1994) 94–107, at 102.

language use in *Four Quartets* as constituting lexis, which “discovers a spiritual presence in its own performative capacity, in its historical reservoir, and in the life of tradition.”¹⁵ The discussion can also be seen as taking issue with critic John Paul Riquelme’s contention that by dissolving the assumptions about the “self” in his work Eliot intentionally distanced himself from rhetorical devices such as *prosopopoeia*, a much used figure of speech in earlier nineteenth-century poetry.¹⁶ In fact, *Four Quartets* is stylistically reliant on such strategies to convey theme and can be seen as embracing rather than vitiating them as Riquelme claims. Consequently, an expanded interpretive approach that considers Eliot’s use of specific selected imagery as more extensive in its signification than has been previously acknowledged is required.

A brief overview of the individual *Quartets* will help to summarize some of the major themes Eliot chose to elucidate and how nonhuman, transformative elements identified in each poem are relevant to the discussion which follows. *Burnt Norton*—the first in the series of poems—is linked thematically to air and light and moves through phases of contemplation on the subjects of time, disaffection, and language interspersed by moments of epiphany and revelation. The poem also includes a series of pertinent images: rose garden, thrush, pool / cloud, kingfisher, and others which help to carry forward some of the poem’s major thematic elements. The second work in the collection, *East Coker*, is aligned with images of earth (ashes, flesh, fur, feces, etc.) and the Christian Eucharist—“The dripping blood our only drink, / The bloody flesh our only food” (EC IV: 167–68). This second quartet’s progression is towards communion with the divine through the physical surroundings: fields, stones, turf, and other terrain. Its predominance of natural imagery eventually closes with the “wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters / Of the petrel and the porpoise” (EC V: 208–9). The poem’s overall setting is in distinct contrast to many of Eliot’s earlier works in which prefigured landscapes appear and where sterile, desiccated imagery predominates. *East Coker* is a place where the initiates participate in their first holy communion, yet also where doubts remain about the efficacy of spiritual regeneration and salvation. The language of supplication and entreaty—as befitting a novice—is outstripped by preponderant images of water found in nearly every verse paragraph of the next in the quatern of poems, *The Dry Salvages*. As the work’s title indicates, residual elements of dryness persist and true redemption will require prayer and intercession: the “Lady” of the shrine in section IV will figure as one such intermediary. The earlier “bone on the beach” of section II of the poem will fulfill a similar role. The final quartet, *Little Gidding*, holds forth the promise of sanctification and redemption: the work’s predominant thematic elements include the recurrent images of fire and rose, but also the figure of the crown, linked with

¹⁵ Cornelia Cook, “Fire and Spirit: Scripture’s Shaping Presence in T. S. Eliot’s ‘Four Quartets.’” *Literature and Theology* 15 (2001) 85–101, at 99.

¹⁶ John Paul Riquelme, *Harmony of Dissonances: T. S. Eliot, Romanticism, and Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1991) 45.

Dante and certain of the religious concerns addressed in *Four Quartets*. Against this backdrop of refining fire and inanity, Eliot actively worked to achieve his thematic and aesthetic objectives.

As briefly referred to above, part of Eliot's creative agenda was to isolate objects as not merely symbolic intermediaries but as purposive agents with the ability to function as a link to the divine world. Through this approach the poet was able to utilize images of birds, rose gardens, lights, bells, waves, statues, and other items across the four poems, allotting each a role that included mediation of a pseudo-dialogic nature. The entire incantatory mood of *Four Quartets* is reflective of such movement, highlighting Eliot's reliance on the transformative medium of ritual to bring into consciousness a new means by which to commune with the nontemporal, divine world the poet was so much concerned with. In its role as intermediary, the kingfisher's wing in *Burnt Norton*, for instance, answers "light to light" (BN IV: 135), mimicking call and response in an ideal form of wordless exchange—a "purified" dialect of sorts. Here the divine intersects with the temporal, aesthetically portraying the residual light that remains at "the still point of the turning world" (BN IV: 136). This in turn foregrounds another aspect of the poet's chosen imagery—that is, as catalyzed objects unchanged in their encounter yet bringing about an alteration in terms of human consciousness. Cook elaborates on the brief epiphany involving the kingfisher's wing explaining that the "light of the bird's wing, comes from the sun/creator and is given back to the sun/creator"; yet, without the body—lightless itself—there would be no answering light.¹⁷ It is an example of Eliot's use of imagery as a transfiguring device, in answer to the section's preceding lines:

Will the sunflower turn to us, will the clematis
Stray down, bend to us; tendril and spray
Clutch and cling?

Chill
Fingers of yew be curled
Down on us? (BN IV: 129–34)

Here, the poem's speaker queries the extent, or by what sign, the divine world will interact with the temporal. Such aesthetic engagement is in marked contrast to Eliot's earlier poetry where symbol and myth were often displayed as "against a template" rather than harnessed for their potential transformative effects.¹⁸ In addition, where previous work often featured the writer's interior thoughts projected onto external landscapes characterized by desolate urban settings and disjointed imagery—the poet's seminal *The Waste Land*, for instance—in *Four Quartets* Eliot now attempts

¹⁷ Cook, "Fire and Spirit," 90.

¹⁸ See Patricia Waugh, *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2006) 126.

to utilize the external world to shape and influence the internal, spiritual (and psychic) one. This is illustrated in the opening segment of *Burnt Norton*, where footfalls “echo in the memory”:

Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. My words echo
Thus, in your mind. (12–15)

This is accompanied a few lines later by the questioning statement: “Other echoes / Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?” (17–18). Here the notion of receptivity to what is occurring in both the inner (mental) and outer (physical) terrain hints at an anticipated transformation of some kind; a dialectic of sorts has been established. Added to this communicative exchange is a sense of “mediation” occurring amongst the poem's participants, one of them nonhuman:

Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,
Round the corner. Through the first gate,
Into our first world, shall we follow
The deception of the thrush? Into our first world.
There they were, dignified, invisible,
Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves,
In the autumn heat, through the vibrant air,
And the bird called, in response to
The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery (BN I: 19–27)

The “deception of the thrush?” in line 22 is linked to the bird's earlier entreaties to “Quick . . . find them, find them” (19). Yet this mode of exchange is quickly “echoed,” or displaced, by an extralinguistic one first elaborated when the thrush of line 27 recognizes the “unheard music hidden in the shrubbery” which the human agent—or speaker—is unable to identify. Subverting the human element also heightens the distinction between the worlds of the real and the unreal and, by extension, the relationship—or disjuncture—between man and the divine. For the human ear there are only echoes; what the ear is denied in the opening lines of the poem the thrush responds to communicatively. Yet the notion of something existing beyond the temporal world has been brought forward into human consciousness through the exchange. Additionally, the bird is privy to an alternative reality mirrored in the way a pool of light a few lines later is emptied by a passing cloud; unveiled is some alternative state of things, recalling Thomas Hardy's use of birds for similar aesthetic purposes, with an equivalent transformative impact on the poem's speaker.¹⁹ The roses in *Burnt Norton*'s garden appear to mediate between one another to a similar end and are both “accepted and accepting”; there

¹⁹ See Thomas Hardy, “The Darkling Thrush” in *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin Classics, 1998) 33.

is engagement of a uniquely nonlinguistic kind and endowed with Aristotelian *energeia* that makes the personified live and move, and even speak. To this end, the functional communicativeness of Eliot's chosen material achieves even greater significance in *The Dry Salvages*, where the image of the "bone on the beach" carries with it polyvalent meaning:

Where is there an end of it, the soundless wailing,
The silent withering of autumn flowers
Dropping their petals and remaining motionless;
Where is there an end to the drifting wreckage,
The prayer of the bone on the beach, the unprayerable
Prayer at the calamitous annunciation? (DS II: 49–54)

In addition to its temporal significance the poet associates this same bone with prayer, transfiguring an inanimate object into a signifier with the power to communicate to "Death its God" (DS II: 83). Reminiscent of prophecies in the Bible where bones respond to divine command (Ezek 37:1–10), the bone is not merely a symbol of death, but is engendered with a purposiveness that enhances notions of the "other" beyond the conventional image; this is alterity possessed of its own unique type of *langue* and representative of a significant stylistic innovation across *Four Quartets*.

As briefly outlined above, Eliot relied on certain stylistic effects in *Four Quartets* that clouded the distinction between appearance and reality; yet such an approach was also a means of highlighting their natures as inseparably, and communicatively, linked. It was a distinction made even more concise by the poet's inclusion of specific, nonhuman, imagery that challenged conventional linguistic representation. Monroe, in his article on the Gnostic aspects of Eliot's poetry, explains that "what we know with our culturally mediated tools of perception and analysis is not the ground of knowledge; what we experience is not reality itself, but something foisted on us by our collective linguistic system."²⁰ Often this "linguistic system" fails to articulate what is the true "reality" behind the images presented. In the first of the *Quartets*, for instance, the figured bird implores the "we" of the poem to "Go, go, go," immediately followed by the statement: "human kind / Cannot bear very much reality" (BN I: 42–43). This directive may be an order to leave the garden or—conversely—an entreaty to explore further. Eliot uses a colon to punctuate the line, isolating to some degree the bird's command from the pronouncement which follows it, again highlighting the disjuncture that exists between the temporal world (as represented by the rose garden, and the bird itself) and human perceptions of that world. It is a place of estrangement where human attempts to perceive this world appear blunted and where there is:

²⁰ William F. Monroe, "T. S. Eliot's Gnostic Impulses," *Journal of Literature and Theology* 6 (1992) 191–206, at 195.

neither daylight
 Investing form with lucid stillness
 Turning shadow into transient beauty
 With slow rotation suggesting permanence
 Nor darkness to purify the soul (BN III: 92–96)

Significantly, however, there is a communicative reality behind the exchanges, further elucidated by the presence of nonhuman elements in the poem. A description of the roses and lotus in the garden in section I of *Burnt Norton* is followed by their reflection in a pool “filled with water out of sunlight” (35). The flowers are experienced a second time through the ethereal medium of air and sunlight rather than as reflected in a body of water which is, in fact, nonexistent: “And they were behind us, reflected in the pool” (38). Something consciously experienced as real is brought about through a phenomenon occurring in nature involving the interaction of both concrete and abstract elements. In a similar manner, the poet speaks of the trading of light and dark to help validate meaning in the worlds of appearance and reality in section III of *East Coker*:

So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.
 Whisper of running streams, and the winter lightning.
 The wild thyme unseen and the wild strawberry,
 The laughter in the garden, echoed ecstasy
 Not lost, but requiring, pointing to the agony
 Of death and birth. (128–33)

Such imagery is further elucidated in section V of *The Dry Salvages* where sense and reality are juxtaposed one with the other:

the winter lightning
 Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
 That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
 While the music lasts. (DS V: 209–12)

There are only “hints and guesses,” and “Hints followed by guesses” (DS V: 212–13), leaving the quest for closer communion frustrated; yet there is also the promise of a place where the

impossible union
 Of spheres of existence is actual,
 Here the past and future
 Are conquered, and reconciled (DS V: 216–19)

It is only in the final *Quartet*, *Little Gidding*, where recognition of the distinction between appearance and reality is fused to the changing pattern of knowledge: “See, now they vanish, / The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them, / To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern” (LG III: 164–66).

Such a situation hints at the notion that the real and the unreal may not be entirely separate entities: a dichotomy of sorts exists. Its intersection is the world of nature made manifest through the communicative dialectic of Eliot's chosen images. Such a consciousness is characteristic in *Four Quartets* of the communicative potential Eliot felt was realized through the nonhuman elements in the poem in their role as intermediaries with the divine.

Supplementing this enhanced articulateness amidst change is the process of inversion at work across *Four Quartets* whereby nonhuman objects are allocated powers of "speech" while, in contrast, human communicants are somehow limited in this capacity. The thrush's entreaties in section I of *Burnt Norton* involve a pseudo-dialogue that grants the bird communicativeness verging on *prosopopoeia*; in Lanham's sense of the word, this would figure as an animal or inanimate object represented as having human attributes.²¹ For Wales, the term has a somewhat more expanded definition: that is, as a variation, or extension, of personification.²² Considered as a functional rhetorical device making what is abstract somehow visible and comprehensible, it can also be representative of transformation on the psychic level and therefore fully consistent with Eliot's artistic and aesthetic aims. Additionally, when employed as a figure of speech it is often matched with silence—or an assumed listener—resulting in reduced human articulation as in section II of *The Dry Salvages* and the "unprayerable / Prayer at the calamitous annunciation?" (53–54). And, as illustrated above, sound and light mimic communication and are almost epiphanic in the way they skirt linguistic modes of expression humans might normally rely on. Yet, even this kind of human/nonhuman communicative exchange can be tenuous: in *The Dry Salvages* IV, drowned seamen are out of reach of "the sound of the sea bell's / Perpetual angelus" (182–83). Equivalent human-to-human attempts at communicative exchange are also frequently muted, or even thwarted, as in *East Coker* III where conversation among passengers on a subway car falters and slowly "fades into silence" (119). Similarly, in the opening section of *Little Gidding*, Eliot goes as far as to assign the power of speech to the deceased, subjugating human communicants who are still alive and signaling a progression away from conventional forms of language: "And what the dead had no speech for, when living, / They can tell you, being dead: the communication / Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living" (49–51). Moody claims that such words have had their "specific density refined out of them" and that this represents the final abstraction of conventional language in the poem, leading to unhindered articulateness of a different kind.²³ As one of the Eliot's chief *modus operandi* in *Four Quartets*, therefore, imagery disposed to such communicativeness maintains an imperfect yet eclectic form of converse among the participants—both

²¹ See Richard A. Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* (Berkeley: University of California, 1991) 123.

²² See Katie Wales, *A Dictionary of Stylistics* (New York: Longman, 2001) 325.

²³ Moody, "Four Quartets: Music, Word, Meaning, and Value," 151.

animate and inanimate—and ultimately helps to define meaning in the work as a whole. In rhetorical terms these potentially communicative nonhuman elements might also be construed as animated images with the power to commune, elevated beyond the merely symbolic or metaphoric to a metonymic level. As discussed above, the kingfisher's wing in *Burnt Norton* draws this sort of inference by trading light for light. Rather than simply signaling equivalency, therefore, the poet's selected images are catalytic in nature. This is in line with their overall, general functionality and the poet's desire that thematic concerns be carried forward by entities not predisposed to human communication. In *Little Gidding*, for instance, the voice of the hidden waterfall and the children in the apple tree are not known ". . . because not looked for / But heard, half-heard, in the stillness / Between two waves of the sea" (LG V: 251–53) Such "voices" as that of the waterfall and the children "heard, half-heard" are realized through the natural environment where such communicative, extralinguistic, transaction is possible and represents a process of abstraction that leaves humans literally "wordless." It is reminiscent of the linguistically immature—yet divinely significant—infant portrayed in Eliot's earlier *Gerontion* who, as "The word within a word, unable to speak a word" (18)²⁴ merges into its final triadic aspect, carrying forward the poet's thematic elements of Christian religious doctrine.

In the role of mediating signifiers, therefore, Eliot's chosen images function catalytically rather than on terms of metaphoric equivalence as part of a general movement towards abstraction. Yet, rather than being strictly apophatic, the result of this process is an added communitarian quality in *Four Quartets* involving portrayed nonhuman "voices," most often realized through the use of antiphons and other forms of reciprocal exchange. In section I of *The Dry Salvages*, for example, "The sea has many voices, / Many gods and many voices. . . . Often together heard" (24–28). These resolve into the one voice of the "tolling bell" (35) clanging with the rhythm of the sea's ground swell that measures "time not our time" (DS I: 36). Moody states that after the first two verse paragraphs of *East Coker*, and throughout the remainder of *Four Quartets*, the different elements—which the author characterizes as musical instruments—will cooperate rather than contend with each other.²⁵ This is reflected in the way the sea and its inhabitants are highly communicative, manifesting themselves orally in a variety of ways: "The sea howl / And the sea yelp, are different voices" (DS I: 26–27) yet are heard in unison in a kind of chorale:

the whine in the rigging,
The menace and caress of wave that breaks on water,
The distant rote in the granite teeth,
And the wailing warning from the approaching headland

²⁴ T. S. Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays: 1909–1950* (Orlando: Harcourt, Brace, 1980) 21.

²⁵ Moody, "Four Quartets: Music, Word, Meaning, and Value," 145.

Are all sea voices, and the heaving groaner
 Rounded homewards, and the seagull:
 And under the oppression of the silent fog
 The tolling bell (DS I: 28–35)

This sort of dynamic is again manifested in the conclusion to *East Coker* where the poet strives for a “. . . further union, a deeper communion / Through the dark cold and the empty desolation” (EC V: 206–7), linking this hope to the poem’s concluding lines: “The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters / Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning” (208–9). This juxtaposing of the nonhuman—both animate and inanimate—points to a certain unity of imagery; there is also transformation, however, within the poet’s interior landscape (mind) through its link with processes in the natural world. What is revealed is a means by which this “further union” and “deeper communion” (206) can be achieved—through the polyvalent and pertinacious world of nature. This is nature’s “response” to the “dark cold and the empty desolation” (207) that the poet intuitively feels; here the “wave cry, the wind cry” (EC V: 208)—with the “wave” and “wind” as adjuncts to the noun “cry”—provide the other half of the “dialogue,” or the extralinguistic articulation needed to achieve heightened poetic expression. This is a dynamic later mirrored in *The Dry Salvages II* where—out of the soundlessness of the mock sestina—the earlier, clanging bell is aurally linked to the “calamitous annunciation” (54) of the subsequent verse passage. For Cook such imagery is etymologically associated with prayer: “clang” becomes a “Clamour”; the clamour, as *clamare*, becomes “prayer” or another form of call and response.²⁶ Cook goes on to cite a later instance in *Four Quartets* of Eliot’s use of voice, this time lines from *Little Gidding*: “With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this / Calling” (LG V: 239–40). The author claims that this phrase suggests the “fundamental meaning of *parakaleo*—a call which refers back to the one who calls, leading the called to the caller.” She adds that this “seems to be the function of language; that is, to draw, to respond” and, like the kingfisher’s wing answering light to light, the “key transaction is the return to the source.”²⁷ This pattern of call and response is also evident in other parts of *Four Quartets* as attempts at converse are incorporated into expositions on the nature of prayer and language in general. Such notions are elucidated even earlier in *Little Gidding I* where Eliot explains prayer’s validity: “And prayer is more / Than an order of words, the conscious occupation / Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying” (46–48) which points to communicative exchange beyond a simple pattern of query and response, or interior dialogue. Sometimes these exchanges occur in mystical, esoteric settings as in *Little Gidding II*, where the poem’s speaker meets the familiar “compound ghost” (95) referenced earlier: “So I assumed a double part, and cried / And heard another’s voice cry: ‘What! are

²⁶ Cook, “Fire and Spirit,” 94.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

you here?’ / Although we were not” (97–99). Attempts at communicative dialogue of this kind often resolve into didactic pronouncements by one or another of the speakers. Such voices eventually move towards greater and greater abstraction; the “voice” referenced earlier of the hidden waterfall and the children in the apple tree “heard, half-heard” (LG V: 249–52) is realized through the natural environment where such communicative, nonlinguistic transaction is made possible. Instances of such “calling” again illustrate Eliot’s reliance on nonhuman imagery to convey meaning and assist in carrying forward the poet’s overall thematic agenda.

In addition to contributions by different “voices” as those outlined above, other instances of communicative exchange within *Four Quartets* are also inherently lyrical in nature and reverberate musically as an extralinguistic mode of communication. Some critics have characterized the poems as informed by a compositional framework reminiscent of Beethoven’s later string quartets, purportedly Eliot’s original inspiration for his work.²⁸ Others have observed that the brief fourth section of each poem resembles a kind of *scherzo*.²⁹ In an example of such musicality, the “trilling wire in the blood” (49) in the second section of *Burnt Norton* “sings” in an attempt to appease “long forgotten wars” (51). This is matched later in *East Coker* IV where the poet again utilizes images of singing and wires on line 163 (“The fever sings in mental wires”) to elicit, through sound, the notion of an extralinguistic communicative exchange. The quavering or vibrating sound might be interpreted as communicative, yet is also inherently nonlinguistic in the way it resembles the warbling of a bird, pointing back to the deceptive thrush in the earlier quartet. Such a dialectic represents an ability to commune and is evident in the contrapuntal or antiphonic arrangements that lyrically mimic dialogue across the four poems. Yet it also represents a rarified mode of discourse beyond conventional human language that is still communitarian in its functional efficacy. For instance, lines 146–48 in the third section of *The Dry Salvages* reads: “At nightfall, in the rigging and the aerial, / Is a voice descanting (though not to the ear, / The murmuring shell of time, and not in any language).” The word “descanting” implies a song accompanied by, or played above, a basic melody and in the *Quartets* it becomes part of a pattern of communicative exchange reliant on hidden responses of the kind the bird anticipates in the garden in *Burnt Norton* I. Preludial, metronomic images also figure predominantly as the “tolling bell” that is “rung by the unhurried / Ground swell, a time / Older than the time of chronometers” (DS I: 35–38), later mirrored in the mantra-like chant of section IV in which the three stanzas each resemble a chanson or canticle. Though nonmetrical, each displays an internal harmony distinguished by sibilance and a preponderance of “s” sounds:

²⁸ See Louis L. Martz, *Many Gods and Many Voices: The Role of the Prophet in English and American Modernism* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1998) 140.

²⁹ See Barry Spurr, “The Centre of Meaning in Eliot’s ‘Four Quartets’” in *Seeking the Centre: The 2001 Australian International Religion, Literature and Arts Conference Proceedings* (Sydney: RLA, 2002) 370–78, at 376.

Also pray for those who were in ships, and
 Ended their voyage on the sand, in the sea's lips
 Or in the dark throat which will not reject them
 Or wherever cannot reach them the sound of the sea bell's
 Perpetual angelus. (DS IV: 179–83)

Leimberg adds that as a compositional element such “crossed” structures are also prominent in the other quartets’ musical motifs: for instance, in the chiasmus of section one on lines 37–38 of *East Coker* (“Earth . . . mirth” / “Mirth . . . earth”) and in the antithetical pairing of “Feet rising and falling. / Eating and drinking. Dung and death” (EC I: 45–46). In addition, such cruciate-like forms appear earlier in *Burnt Norton* I where the “unseen eyebeam crossed” (28), supporting Leimberg’s contention that throughout *Four Quartets* human nature and the *altera natura* of poetry connect.³⁰ This “crossing” of realities figures as an adumbrative aside for the closing movements of the poem, but also as a musical trope in the way that at the end of *Little Gidding* II the compound ghost fades away “on the blowing of the horn” (149). Here, a new spiritual and performative mode exploits communicative possibilities as an alternative to delimited, lexical ones.

As discussed at length above, adoption by Eliot of nonhuman imagery of a mediating kind—whether natural, lyrical, or otherwise contrived—aims at achieving communion with that which exists outside the temporal world. As such, it points to an extralinguistic mode of expression for the poet and represents a central stylistic element across all four of the *Quartets*. Eliot’s use of the communicative thrush in the opening lines of *Burnt Norton* I referenced earlier, for instance, draws such an inference and might be compared to Howard Nemerov’s similar use of birds as potential mediators in his poem “Brainstorm.”³¹ Shelestiuk describes the poet’s portrayal of crows as archetypal symbols which mediate between heaven and earth or between this world and some other one.³² While Nemerov’s birds “talk” to the house featured in the poem in their “black voices” and nature is seen to carry on a dialogue of sorts, Eliot’s thrush has the added functional dimension of pointing to the unheard music “hidden in the shrubbery” (BN I: 27). This assists in conjuring a world that is elusive yet also transformative and epiphanic, and is a transfiguring aspect mirrored in the concluding lines of *East Coker* V cited earlier. As if in chorus, the natural world accomplishes a “deeper communion” (206): the “wave cry” (call) and “wind cry” (response) in the following lines achieve interaction of a uniquely nonhuman kind which, in turn, becomes the channel for humans to establish a link outside the immediate known world. However, human response sometimes fails to recognize the significance of such encounters:

³⁰ Inge Leimberg, “The Place Revisited in T. S. Eliot’s ‘Four Quartets,’” *Connotations* 8 (1998/99) 63–92, at 73–74.

³¹ Howard Nemerov, *The Collected Poems of Howard Nemerov* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1977) 196.

³² Helen V. Shelestiuk, “Semantics of Symbol,” *Semiotica* 144 (2003) 233–59, at 249.

The silent withering of autumn flowers
 Dropping their petals and remaining motionless;
 Where is there an end to the drifting wreckage,
 The prayer of the bone on the beach . . . (DS II: 50–53)

The nonhuman participants in each quartet await no such resolution. The withered flowers, the drifting wreckage, and the bone on the beach are part of the unending motion that is also the “still point” for Eliot: the multifoliate construct of past, present, and future. The bone is inanimate yet capable of “prayer,” while for the human agent prayer is “unprayable” and associated with adversity (the “calamitous annunciation” of the succeeding line). The bone communicates with “Death its God” while human prayer seems reduced or limited to the “hardly, barely prayable / Prayer of the one Annunciation” (DS II: 83–84). The praying bone—as with the earlier “heaving groaner” (DS I: 32) and the incessant “tolling bell” (35)—seems to measure an indivisible past, present, and future and is reminiscent of a muted dirge that goes on ad infinitum. By contrast, human traces are mere relics: “the torn seine,” “the broken oar,” and “the gear of foreign dead men” (DS I: 22–24) are all silenced by the natural elements. Such human muteness in the face of nature’s gregariousness is significant in its suggestion that any “purified dialect”—as a means for communing with the divine—requires deciphering of just this sort of nonhuman “language.” Such a notion is reinforced by the way in which the “Lady” whose shrine “stands on the promontory” in *The Dry Salvages* IV is cast in the role of intermediary between mankind and the divine:

Pray for all those who are in ships, those
 Whose business has to do with fish, and
 Those concerned with every lawful traffic
 And those who conduct them. (170–3)

This supplication is reiterated in the following stanza’s “Repeat a prayer . . .” (174) and the subsequent verse’s “Also pray for . . .” (179). It is entreaty equivalent in purposiveness to ritualized incantation and, as such, works to establish a link between the divine and temporal worlds. The figure of the “Lady” is both the human companion and divine guide through which the poet’s feeling finds expression; for purposes of intercession, human voices alone are inadequate. The sea’s bells are conflated with the mantra-like “perpetual angelus” of the poem’s closing lines leaving human seafarers mute or disappeared down the sea’s “dark throat” where these continual sounds of call and response cannot reach them. The power of mediation appears to reside with the inanimate objects and their communicative functionality rather than with the human agent in such instances. However, this does not preclude the transformation occurring in the human mind as the result of such encounters.

As outlined in detail above, there is an inversion at work across *Four Quartets* whereby nonhuman objects are allocated powers of “speech” while, in contrast,

human communicants are somehow limited in this capacity. The poet's use of nonhuman imagery as essential elements constituting a new dialect or channel through which to commune with the divine world takes on an almost Eucharistic significance, making possible a catalytic transformation within the poet's psyche and functioning as a uniquely ritualized mode of communication. Within the context of the four poems, as a whole, such an achievement was ultimately directed at rejuvenation of the human spirit, as well as towards the revived community consciousness that Eliot envisioned. *Little Gidding* represents the final stage in this linear progression towards imagery the poet conceived as endowed with significance beyond the temporally referential. This is further mirrored in the work by the elimination of the four medieval elements—corresponding to the four poems themselves—in section II of the poem. This consequently directs the reading back to the opening sequence in *Burnt Norton* and its exposition on the nature of ephemeral time and is further emblematic of the general movement of images across *Four Quartets* towards greater and greater abstraction. As a mode of commutation the process in a sense comes full circle—iterated in the opening and closing lines of *East Coker*: “In my beginning is my end” / “In my end is my beginning”—and situates the poems in a larger allegorical framework where the temporal world is effectively superseded, or subsumed. One thing is continually being traded for another: just as old stone and timber are displaced by new buildings and purgatorial fires in the opening lines of the poem, so the action is earlier mirrored in the way the cloud in *Burnt Norton* I empties the pool of light. Human voices are subsequently preempted by spiritual intermediaries in *The Dry Salvages* while in *Little Gidding* the elements—mimicking Heraclitean change—are supplanted by death, later resolving into a final set of images where “. . . the tongues of flame are in-folded / Into the crowned knot of fire / And the fire and the rose are one” (LG V: 259–61). Such were the notions Eliot linked at the conclusion of *Four Quartets* to ideas of sacrifice and the movement from supplication through to salvation over time; it was an achievement of final synthesis set against the communicative backdrop of a single tongued speech, or *lingua*. It was also entelechy reminiscent of Dante's image of the rose expanding to the light in a move towards the final vision in Canto XXX of the *Paradiso*—a single point of intense illumination “where every where and every when is focused” and we are prepared to recognize within the depths of that flame, “ingathered, bound by love in one volume, the scattered leaves of all the universe.”³³ Such a dynamic was perhaps as close to a purified mode of discourse as Eliot could achieve within the strictures of conventional language; adopting nonhuman imagery possessed of a highly numinous quality allowed the poet to more successfully map out meaning in *Four Quartets* within the context of his designated poetic and spiritual agenda.

³³ See Maud Bodkin, *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry: Psychological Studies of Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1961) 259–60.