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Doctrine and Wisdom in Four Quartets

No modern poet is so anthologized in collections of devotional and religious verse as T. S. Eliot, and no poet would have been more ambivalent about this mode of reception. This response is not one Eliot actively solicited for his work, nor one to which his poetry is always as conveniently suited as it may appear. The ambiguity ancient and well-preserved monuments represent, at once occasions of living worship and testaments to a desire to fetishize as past what we cannot quite assent to as present, often attends as well a devotional use of Eliot's work. Hence his poems function uneasily, if at all, as a kind of modern day simulacrum of the kind of traditional religious and inspirational art to which they are so often compared.

Eliot was, I would argue, fully aware of this slight disjuncture between his poetry and that of other, less secular, cultures and times. Rather than waste energy in deploring it, however, he made of it part of the substance of his reflections. He thus contributed far more than a mere lesson in nostalgia to the religious sensibility of his time. The poems of his Christian period are in this respect at once devotional and modern not only in the literary, but in the religious senses of the term. While clearly designed to evoke more than a merely aesthetic response, they are at the same time fully reflective of that essential relativizing and reformulating of Christian tradition which stemmed, at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, from

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a greater knowledge of other faiths, from Biblical criticism, and from the rise of science. (The term *modern* in this context refers, of course, specifically, to the efforts in and around the Roman Catholic church to open its teaching to the insights of the new Biblical scholarship. Baron von Hügel, whose thought so attracted and repelled Yeats, was perhaps its best-known Roman Catholic exponent, one of the few moderates to survive the repressive reaction. Eliot himself sometimes made use of the term in this sense. See for instance his syllabus for a course of lectures given to adult students in London reprinted in A. D. Moody's *T. S. Eliot, Poet* [124].)

Some such modern stance was widely felt, in Eliot's day, to be the necessary consequence, both for Roman Catholics and for Protestants, of three major factors: the rediscovery of other, notably Eastern, religious and spiritual traditions; the entirely new view of Christian history and of Biblical truth required by the development of the Higher Criticism in Germany, with its emphasis on the role of changing interpretation in constituting the Christian community; and the need to formulate a non-defensive and intellectually respectable response to the growing prestige of science. Eliot's interest in all of these fields of inquiry is evident from his graduate school papers and from the numerous reviews he wrote for the *International Journal of Ethics* and other learned periodicals in his early years, reviews which touched often on the issues raised for religious faith by science, psychology, anthropology and sociology, as well as by philosophy and comparative religion.

Eliot judged a good deal of the liberal response to these challenges a mere attenuation of Christian truth, a method, as he said of Royce's efforts in this direction, of the last resuscitation of the dead. He was, however, by no means oblivious to or dismissive of modern tendencies in religion, and later his position in church politics and dogmatic disputes did not always place him on the conservative end of the spectrum. Contra Yeats, he did, of course, regard belief in such doctrines as the incarnation as touchstones of Christian faith, but he also wrestled again and again with the precise terms on which these doctrines could be affirmed in an intellectually responsible way. Similarly with a number of the issues which confronted and changed church life and even church policy in his times, he tried to be responsive both to the Catholic tradition and to the new forms of knowledge which required the shattering and refounding of that tradition from a more sophisticated point of view. Eliot's middle and later work reflects throughout this wrestle with words and meanings, as well as a tension between doctrinal formulations which demand assent or denial and those more diffuse and subtle, but by no means less powerful, appeals which require a transformation of emotion and will. Throughout, he attempted to hold skepticism not in abeyance but in solution, until it could be dissolved and recrystallized, again and again, into belief.

To some extent, this modern approach to religious certainty cohabits, not always smoothly, with Eliot's own devotional temperament and his deep assimilation of the inspirational and spiritual writing of other cultures and of the past. We can see him brooding over the resulting problems and contradictions in a small preface he wrote for an anthology of devotional writing by Tagore's son-in-law, N. Gangulee. Here Eliot wished to establish a certain hierarchy in ways of reading, whereby a devotional, as opposed to philosophical and aesthetic, response to a text is distinctly a higher enterprise, one in which differences of religious tradition and even discursive belief are transcended; though it is only in relation to these that the transcendence has meaning. Nevertheless, he did not want simply to ignore questions of doctrinal difference at the discursive level or pretend that these might simply be reduced to some lowest common denominator or perennial philosophy. Nor did he wish to ignore all the complex motivations for reading that psychology and to some extent sociology and history had taught him were implicated in the reception of any text. His summary of these problems has an Eliotic suavity and grace that conceal as well as reveal the profundity and wisdom of his own consideration of these issues. In devotional reading, he says:

We have to abandon some of our usual motives for reading. We must surrender the love of Power—whether over others, or over ourselves, or over the material world. We must abandon even the love of Knowledge . . . what these writers aim at, in their various idioms, in whatever language or in terms of whatever religion, is the Love of God. They gave their lives to this, and their destination is not one which we can reach any quicker than they did or without the same tireless activity and tireless passivity. (Gangulee x)

And yet, Eliot concludes, we must not, on the other hand, assume that doctrinal distinctions do not matter, for it was “only in relation to his own religion that the insights of any of these [devotional writers] had significance to him” at all (13).

We must note that the austerity and totality of response Eliot calls for in this preface reside in the activity of reading, rather than in any position affirmed within the text itself, and thus cannot be completely identified with the discursive content of the work considered independently of that response. Eliot thus establishes the force and validity of a way of reading which is open at once to the learned and the unlearned, and which depends on the attention and involvement of the whole self in the act of reading, not simply on the intellectual assent of the reasoning or logical part of the mind. This devotional attention does not finesse but surpasses the issues of doctrine and

belief, making use of them as ladders, not as goals. It also insists on unmasking, through introspection and self-mastery, that will to power that lurks under the guise of the will to truth (and to doctrinal correctness) and even under the more apparently innocent aspect of the will to beauty.

Eliot's remarks on the question of the Christian relation to other faiths, particularly Eastern ones, spell out a kind of program for *Four Quartets*:

Some readers, attracted by the occult, think only Asiatic literature has religious understanding. Others distrust mysticism and stay narrowly Christian. For both it is salutary to learn that the Truth is not occult, and that it is not wholly confined on the one hand to their own religious tradition, or on the other hand to an alien culture and religion which they regard with superstitious awe. (Gangulee 11)

The Dry Salvages may be read as a concerted effort to instill this salutary lesson by means of a poetic juxtaposition of Christian devotion as classically understood and the devotion of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

There is, however, a certain problem when this celebration of devotional reading is brought into relation with a modern sensibility, whether we think of the modern as an aesthetic or a religious category. In the first place, as Eliot clearly points out, the ultimate proof of a devotional text lies in its reading not its writing. This reception is, however, in the final analysis outside the writer's control. Issues of craft and technique in the text itself, issues so foregrounded in the modern tradition, will then have only a proximate relevance. Secondly, if the hallmark of devotion is simplicity and totality of response, the hallmark of modernity is complexity and qualification, and the two do not always easily coincide. How affirm a deep, non-discursive truth requiring the full attention and assent of the whole reading self and at the same time insist that the reader bear in mind the relativism of its presentation, the presence around it of other, sometime opposing, traditions and points of view, the dangers of a will to power underlying its will to truth, the crucial dimension of historicity which conditions it, the ever-present possibility of unconscious psychological motivations which may subvert and even pervert its intended meaning, and the dependence of the whole effort on a highly sophisticated and continually changing tradition of interpretation? The two can only be brought together by a supreme effort, one which may well end less in a full yet multi-dimensional reading than in a kind of double-think or squint.

While there is perhaps no ultimate solution to this problem, at least part of the responsibility for the overcoming of which rests with the reader

alone, it is still arguable that certain texts are better designed to evoke the kind of response that Eliot wanted for his work than others. As he matured, Eliot came to see the advantages in this respect of what he called *wisdom*, a term which implies both a stance toward experience and a way of writing. As a rhetorical mode, wisdom discourse has certain characteristics Eliot found appealing. First, it depends heavily not on discursive or doctrinal formulation, but on proverb or aphorism for its effect, thus making use of popular expressions, oral formulae, and communal tradition, and by-passing, often usefully, certain issues of dogma and rational belief. Secondly, it is often anonymous or pseudonymous, sometimes by attribution to some speaker with a ritual function, a Solomon, or a David, sometimes by association with a persona, Sophia, or the Shekinah, for example. Wisdom writing is thus "impersonal" in Eliot's sense, being divorced as much as possible from the accidents of particular characters or a particular ethos or political/social situation.

Finally, the wisdom tradition allows for wide, even, from a logical point of view, mutually exclusive stances toward experience and belief, ranging from the deepest and most logo centric affirmations—of, for instance, a transcendental Signifier, a God present in and above the entire universe and in language itself—to some of the most radical deconstructive gestures—as for instance the repeated insistence that notions such as God and direct linguistic revelation are worse, in their feebleness, than the silence in which skepticism and mystery are one. Hence, in the wisdom tradition of the Bible, such lines as "the fool has said in his heart, 'there is no God'" may be less contradicted than thrown into deeper relief by other, darker sayings such as "vanity of vanities, all is vanity saith the Preacher." In general, wisdom writing finds no need to reconcile, at least in discursive terms, such apparently divergent positions, allowing context, sensibility, and intuition to invoke them in ways that subvert, without ever entirely canceling, one another. To this end it tries to maintain a certain rhetoric of universality, which is not the same as a perennial philosophy or a reduction to a set of common propositions, though it is often weakly misread in that way.

The rhetoric and stance of the wisdom tradition often helped Eliot reconcile the conflicting demands of modernity and devotion. Of the advantages of this tradition for poetry he was himself entirely aware. In his late essay on Goethe, an essay he almost decided to call "A Discourse in Praise of Wisdom," Eliot explains that wisdom writing, for him, means writing that bases its appeal on something "deeper than . . . logical propositions" and so does not always require assent or denial at the propositional level to be effective. "Of revealed religions, and of philosophical systems, we must believe that one is right and the others wrong," he maintains, "but wisdom is *logos xunos*, the

same for all men everywhere" (OPP 264). It is at once simple, profound, and open in the ecumenical sense that the modern movement was to develop as it sought to come to grips with the respect and reverence due to other faiths.

In terms of Eliot's own work, the reference to *logos xunos*, common or open wisdom, takes us to Heraclitus and one of the epigraphs to *Burnt Norton*. This epigraph may be translated loosely—though Eliot does not translate it at all—as "wisdom is actually common property, but people treat it as if it were a special preserve." When it comes to the expression of this quality of wisdom, Eliot goes on in his Goethe essay, all language is inadequate but probably the language of poetry is least so. He concludes this essay, which itself makes a good gloss on several passages in *Four Quartets*, with an extended quotation from Ecclesiastes which pairs the Greek pre-Socratic philosopher with the Hebrew sage, and captures very well the self-evident, open, universalist simplicity of this poetic mode:

Wisdom shall praise herself,
And shall glory in the midst of her people.
In the congregation of the Most High shall she open her mouth,
And triumph before His power. (OPP 257)

These and similar models of wisdom and a wisdom mode of discourse informed, I think, much of Eliot's later verse, *Four Quartets* in particular, and helped him to write a relativized, self-conscious and complex kind of religious poetry, open to the existence of other faiths and experiences and "modern" in the sense I have tried to specify, and yet a poetry susceptible as well to devotional reading, and capable of evoking and supporting great simplicity as well as great complexity of response.

Eliot's use of the wisdom tradition to by-pass deliberately questions of dogmatic truth and doctrinal assent in *Four Quartets*, even when he himself had arrived at a provisional set of religious beliefs, is much in line not only with the modern movement in religion, but with the philosophical position he had worked out in *Knowledge and Experience*, his dissertation on F. H. Bradley for Harvard, many years before. In this work, skepticism and belief are not opposed to one another but represented as different points along a continuum of response, any absolute claims of either being subverted *a priori* by its dependence on the other. The question of belief in this case is not so much posed for a yes or no as relativized from the beginning. Such a mobile view of discursive truth is, needless to say, by no means a disadvantage when it comes to the writing of poetry. Indeed it allows and encourages that dialectic of "surrender and recovery," identification and detachment, Eliot himself understood the appropriation of poetic texts to entail. Hence "poetry" may be

both distinguished from and inhabited by “belief” in very complex ways, with neither entirely privileged over the other.

This wisdom tradition, however, was not without its dangers for a poet like Eliot. To take only one facet of the problem, “simple wisdom” can very easily look more like platitude than insight, more like sentiment than feeling, more like the ridiculous than the sublime. A quarter turn from its lofty perspectives and one gets hot air rather than inspiration, Polonius rather than the Preacher, Goethe as didact rather than Goethe as sage. We need think only of Whitman at his worst to be reminded of the pitfalls here. Secondly, there is the danger of sentimentality, compromise and appeasement, what Eliot called the “false wisdom” of old age. Here the sharpness of the agonies of youth, the moment in the hyacinth garden or at the top of the stair, are not so much transcended as repressed, and desire is pacified rather than transformed by genuine purgation. Finally, there is the danger of conflation of opposing doctrines and positions, of what Eliot called the “luxury of confounding” as opposed to the “task of combining” different doctrines and points of view (rev. Wolf 426).

In *Four Quartets* Eliot seeks to avoid these pitfalls by insisting that the cost of wisdom is “not less than everything” (CPP 145). “Everything” here must, I think, be seen to include much doctrinal and pious certainty often associated with these poems. “That old-time religion” is simply not celebrated here, not even in the service of “a further union, a deeper communion” (CPP 129). Among the certainties which, for Eliot, must be sacrificed are a naive and uncritical belief in the immortality of what we like to think of as the individual self or soul, an unqualified affirmation of Christian belief as superior to other beliefs in all respects, and an easy expectation that all pain and suffering will be taken care of either by a simple passage of time or by some system of rewards and punishments after death. These are excess baggage that Eliot’s brief but intense sojourn in the mazes of Buddhism and later intense practice of Christian meditation further persuaded him must be jettisoned. That his call to a more rigorous faith has been so often misread and misunderstood is only one of the multiple ironies that have always attended the reception of his work.

We can see this more rigorous formulation of the tradition, a formulation at once modern and yet infused with the immediacy of an active devotional practice, at work throughout *Four Quartets*. These four linked poems, while accessible on the surface, are by no means as genial and instantly affirmative of traditional Christian truths and pieties as they might at first appear. If they do offer pious consolations, those consolations are of a peculiarly radical sort, and the cure may be worse than the disease. Consider, for instance, *East Coker*, the second of the quartets. This is the one first prompted, as A. D. Moody

has pointed out, by the shock to Eliot's sometimes complacent neutralism in politics occasioned by the advance of the Second World War, and in particular by Chamberlain's placation of Hitler at Munich. Here Eliot writes of the first step toward wisdom, which is to be able to recognize its counterfeits. "What was to be the value," he asks, "of the long looked forward to, / Long hoped for calm, the autumnal serenity / And the wisdom of age? Had they deceived us / Or deceived themselves, the quiet-voiced elders, / Bequeathing us merely a receipt for deceit? / The serenity only a deliberate hebetude, / The wisdom only the knowledge of dead secrets / Useless in the darkness into which they peered / Or from which they turned their eyes" (CPP 125). A few lines later there follows one of those aphorisms with which Eliot tried repeatedly to capture the tone and function of the wisdom tradition, aphorisms so finely turned that they seem cited from long tradition already present in the language rather than composed: "We are only undeceived / Of that which, deceiving, could no longer harm."

This section of *East Coker* ends by insisting that the only real wisdom is the wisdom of humility, but the movement of the poem is off and away from this somewhat dead center, which is rather weak at this point, as if Eliot were telling, not showing, preaching, not evoking. Whatever may be premature about the wisdom of *East Coker*, however, is amply destabilized and thrown into question in the great third quartet, *The Dry Salvages*. Here begins a long engaged confrontation with all that makes wisdom seem at times so weak: the savagery of experience, including the experience of holiness, its roots in pain, and the multiple ironies of suffering generated by its extension over time. The problem of this quartet is to peer into that darkness from which the old men of Munich turned their eyes, but to do so without either bitterness or rhetoric or excess.

The techniques Eliot begins to develop here include again the aphorism, the use of a deceptively conversational, ruminative and apparently relaxed style for extremely frightening, catastrophic and subversive insights, the sudden shift from a voice of speculation, as if you were listening to some old friend muse, somewhat disjointedly, over a glass of brandy at the club, to a voice of absolute authority in which the sum of the starkest truths of the poem are delivered. Hence you have "It seems, as one becomes older . . ." (CPP 132)—ah, yes, now we know exactly what to expect, the vapid reminiscences of a sweet old man. What, though, do we get? Well, some of this, to be sure, but as the passage unwinds, we "come to discover" that "the moments of agony . . . are likewise permanent / With such permanence as time has" (CPP 133). Furthermore, since true wisdom is often corrosive as well as salutary, we are then reminded that we "appreciate this better" in the "agony of others" than in our own. This is surely not the wisdom of hebetude or senility or

even conventional Christian piety; indeed it rises at times to a dry realism, a sharpness, which is redeemed from misanthropy only by accuracy of insight. One finds this kind of writing elsewhere only in the French tradition, in La Rochefoucauld or Montaigne. Or think about this one: "You cannot face it steadily, but this thing is sure, / That time is no healer: the patient is no longer there" (CPP 134). Easy notions of cheap redemption and ready personal immortality, the false wisdom of the 'long view' and the 'long run,' do not easily survive this quartet. They are part of that cost of "not less than everything" to which the last lines of *Little Gidding* refer, and for which they are an important preparation (CPP 145).

Little Gidding itself opens with a rather brilliant *tour de force* in Eliot's old metaphysical style. It sounds a bit like the opening of *The Waste Land*, a poem no one has accused of being too sunny. "Midwinter spring is its own season" answers neatly to "April is the cruelest month" (CPP 138, 37). Here we are back again at the beginning, where desire and death are reborn at one and the same moment, leading, it might seem, to the same sterile repetitions, the same hell of necessity without end. We almost expect to meet Tiresias again, that great waste land figure of partial wisdom at its most bleak and most impotent, unable either to break the deadlock of the past or to imagine a different future. In a way, in fact, we *do* meet Tiresias here again, or something like him, for this poem, like *The Waste Land*, like the first of Pound's cantos, begins with an invocation of the spirits of the dead as found in the *Odyssey* and in Virgil, an invocation out of which Tiresias' is, traditionally, the first voice that rises. It is possible to read the following three stanzas of part 2, the lyrics of death by air, earth, and fire, as placed, as it were, in the mouth of Tiresias, the great steady observer of inevitable human futility from Eliot's earlier work.

To continue in this vein, it is perfectly possible, as well, to add to the long list of compound features of the uncanny ghost or figure the speaker encounters in part 2 those of Tiresias, especially in his capacity as harbinger of what awaits us after death. The message isn't particularly pleasant. "Let me disclose," the ghostly double proposes, "the gifts reserved for age / To set a crown upon your lifetime's effort. / First, the cold friction of expiring sense / Without enchantment, offering no promise / But bitter tastelessness of shadow fruit . . . / Second, the conscious impotence of rage / At human folly, and the laceration / Of laughter at what ceases to amuse" (CPP 141, 142). And as if this were not enough, "last, the rending pain of reenactment / Of all that you have done and been; the shame / Of motives late revealed, and the awareness / Of things ill done and done to others' harm / Which once you took for exercise of virtue." Surely this is an echo of that walk "among the lowest of the dead" that showed an earlier version of Tiresias those automatons of empty

sex and failed humanity, the “typist home at teatime” and the “young man carbuncular,” who are also, as *The Waste Land* makes ineluctably clear, earlier versions of ourselves (CPP 44). Then indeed, to cut back to *Little Gidding* again, one might say with Eliot, that “fools’ approval stings, and honor stains” (CPP 142). Humility here is less a rather pompous and pedantic virtue, as it can seem in *East Coker*, than a rigorous exercise in confrontation with the self, one in which no dark stone is left unturned.

If this is wisdom, some may prefer folly, or prefer at least *The Waste Land*’s passionate drive, right to the breaking point of the mind, to be free of this endless circle of self-interested, self-reflexive and self-deluded motivations. Here, however, given his commitment to what he calls *logos xunos*, open wisdom, Eliot cannot turn directly either to Sanskrit or Latin, Italian or Provençal, to find words which will convey both the simplicity of the solution to this problem and its absolute freshness and surprise. Nor can he rely automatically, in the way that many of even his best critics presume he does, on a simple last minute ‘save’ by tradition or history. If he is to draw on the resources of his culture, he must do so in a way that has authority and originality, as well as congruence with the past, and that changes the direction of his culture even as it summons up its strength. Otherwise, he will simply be rehearsing dead wisdom instead of rediscovering the wisdom of the dead.

His solution at the thematic level is to draw into the poem not the energy of his culture’s great victories, but the profundity of its major losses. We do indeed hear the voice of that great sister of wisdom Julian of Norwich, but are reminded that her “all shall be well” emerged from a context of “incandescent terror” generated by extreme mental and physical pain. The reference to a “king at nightfall” (CPP 143) is likewise no exercise in partisanship or nostalgia for a time when one could be “classicist in letters, Anglican in religion and monarchist in politics” without sounding ridiculous, but a reminder of failure counter-balancing the equal and opposite failure of that king’s political enemy, the poet who dies “blind and quiet” a few lines later. Likewise, there is no easy recourse to a notion of one’s work or one’s political struggle living after one by way of consolation. Action as well as contemplation here reach their end, where every gesture of transcendence is “a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea’s throat / Or to an illegible stone” (CPP 144).

So what we have here, then, at the height of the war, precisely, in fact, as the battle of El Alemein is turning the tide in favor of the Allies and preserving the world for nuclear holocaust, is not a hymn to the glories of Western religion and culture but an epitaph for their end, at least as exclusive and self-evident goods. True wisdom lies, for Eliot, not in a false reaffirmation of traditional religious values but in a recognition of the essential conditioning of even the best of their representations by time and relativity. Paradoxically,

however, only tradition can reveal its own ephemera; only history its own emptiness. As Gertrude Stein put it, "all that history teaches is—history teaches." Perhaps one's life had to have exactly the curve of Eliot's, coming of age when Western culture was first tearing itself to shreds and then coming to middle age as it did so again, to yield precisely this kind of bitter wisdom. "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity," saith the preacher."

The wisdom tradition, however, though based on just such paradoxes as these, ultimately requires celebration and simplicity, and comes to fruition only in these modes. But "[a]fter such knowledge, what forgiveness?" How was Eliot to find, to reaffirm, to induct into his poem these qualities of simplicity and joy? The answer, I would argue, lay in a renunciation not only of personal identity as conceived and cherished by the ego, but of the weight of a certain poetic and cultural capital as well. At the end of *Four Quartets* both tradition and the individual talent are sent to the block, down the sea's throat, to an illegible stone, are sent, that is, toward the vanishing point on the horizon of culture where many peoples, religions, value-systems are, in defiance of the wars that divide them, made one.

This renunciation, this vanishing point, cannot, however, for Eliot, be allowed to collapse into poetic or intellectual abdication, or into denial of that difference against which alone it has significance. There must be simplicity, but not oversimplification, ease but not laxity, repose but not a false peace. Eliot's solution to this problem in the last stanza of *Little Gidding* is a lesson in mastery of craft; it involves a highly studied combination of great levelness and decorum of diction, extreme syntactic and grammatical complexity, and a use of imagery as remarkable for its economy as for its power. The diction itself is telling, fulfilling the mandate announced earlier in the poem for a discourse where "every word is at home, / Taking its place to support the others, / The word neither diffident nor ostentatious" (CPP 144). The syntax, however, departs from this decorum, beginning with a phrase floating in white space:

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling
(CPP 145)

after which we almost hear a Poundian "so that": Then comes a straightforward sentence, or so it seems, but one which takes off again into an unfixed relative clause, "When the last of earth left to discover," and having in the end, if examined carefully, no established main subject or verb. These syntactic indeterminacies are suddenly interrupted by "quick now, here, now always" before flowing on again to their end in the final sentence. Even this sentence, however, takes its syntactical core and deep structure from a devotional text of the past, Julian of Norwich's "All shall be well and all manner

of thing small be well,” a core which Eliot carefully surrounds by his own conditional and qualifying clauses.

In that final sentence, the images which close the poem, the fire and the rose, are common to many traditions, occult and exoteric alike, from Buddhism’s Fire Sermon to the gnostic traditions of the Rosicrucians or the Persian and later the Sufi celebrations of the traditional Middle Eastern flower of mystic love. There is, however, a sense here of these associations dropping away, along with a number of the doctrinal distinctions which cluster around them, so that the close becomes less a set of allusions than λόγος ζυνός, open wisdom. This wisdom is accessible indeed, but with an accessibility “costing not less than everything” (CPP 145). Part of that cost is the certainty of Christian pieties often taken for granted as part of the poem but actually asserted there, if at all, only as intensely modern, highly relativized and provisional truths. Having paid that price, moreover, the poem does not rest on its laurels, but asks for more: the sacrifice and purgation not only of idiosyncrasy and personality in Eliot’s old sense, but also of pseudo-devotional sentimentality and unearned consolation as well. The “tireless passivity and tireless activity” required to give this poem the kind of reading it deserves are, then, not to be exhausted in one sitting, or even across a lifetime’s renewed consideration, nor are they confined, as we are coming to learn, to one culture alone.

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