

‘The unattended moment’: selfhood and the experience of the transcendent in *Four Quartets*

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T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* could be considered the English poetic text *par excellence* of modern religious experience. Among other things, these poems address the inadequacy of even poetic language to give voice to the transcendent; the role of tradition and history in the religious experience of each individual; the struggle between modernity’s spiritual scepticism and the lived experience of spiritual insight; and the tense dialectic between the apophatic *via negativa* and more cataphatic paths toward experiencing God. Eliot calls certain experiences ‘the unattended / Moment’, the word ‘unattended’ in this context denoting, at a basic level, a state of consciousness relaxed and (therefore) heightened, and unexpected, as in the French word *inattendu* which may have inspired it.¹ We sometimes assume such mystical experiences come only as a result of the isolation and sensory deprivation of the cloistered saint, but in the *Quartets* these moments are represented as intense encounters between an ordinary self and a real-world phenomenon, inviting us to examine this poem through a phenomenological lens. But what is a self, ordinary or otherwise? This is a vexed postmodern question. What happens when so-called real-world experiences impact on a self in such a way that it is left believing that something extraordinary, even perhaps transcendent, has just taken place? Eliot’s poetic account of ‘unattended moments’ in *Four Quartets* bears remarkable cohesion with the idea of ‘saturated phenomena’ as advanced by Jean-Luc Marion; indeed, Book IV of Marion’s *Being Given* could serve as a running commentary on Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. However, writing from this side of the postmodernist divide, Marion seems compelled to let go of the very notion of transcendence that is the *raison d’être* of *Four Quartets*, so while Eliot and Marion are describing the same experience, their

metaphysical assumptions seem to lead to quite different understandings of that experience.

What sort of phenomenon-experiencing Self does Eliot propose to us? Paul Ricoeur's concept of 'narrative identity', advanced in *Time and Narrative: III* and in *Oneself as Another*, is useful in understanding the evolving, time-resisting but always time-bound, 'pilgrim-subject' of the *Four Quartets*. Ricoeur's idea of narrative identity delineates a Self that is under continual re-inscription, a revising which accommodates several forces, including the accidents of life-as-it-is-lived as well as the ever-evolving definitions of ourselves that are offered back to us by Others who matter to us. In reaction to these accidents and incidents, these appraisals that cannot be dismissed, Ricoeur also posits a more durable, reflective, narrative-generating *idem*-identity – one that is constantly improvising meaning out of experience.² This is the consciousness that remembers and is present at both moments in the common observation 'I am not the man I used to be'. Eliot's *Quartets* clearly figure forth a Self under intense reflexive examination, an examination always cast in terms of its encounters with experienced phenomena, but a self that is durable in a sense that allows it to remember, to suffer and to love. The concept of the ever-changing self, the *ipse*-identity, recognizes the undeniable truth that he who leaves the station and he 'who will arrive at any terminus' ('Dry Salvages') are not the same, but without the durable self, both pilgrimage and redemption would be impossible.

Ricoeur's model of selfhood is entirely suited to narratives of pilgrim souls. By definition, pilgrims desire change, and they believe change comes about through experience rather than the anchorite cell. But they also must assume some durable part of the self that reaps spiritual benefit from these hard-won changes. *Four Quartets* represents a complex pilgrimage – vacillating between moments of *angst* and ecstasy, between an apophatic negation of self and attempts at a meaningful reconstitution of identity through commitment, belief, love and even doubt. Images of this pilgrimage, comprised by a poem the reading of which is also a pilgrimage, are located in moments such as the meandering around to the garden pool at Burnt Norton, the journey down an English country lane to East Coker, the voyages of the fishermen in 'Dry Salvages', and of course both in the sad trek of Charles I to Little Gidding and in the 'dawn patrol' walked by Eliot himself in the final quartet. In the final analysis it is the record of a 'progress of the soul'.³ In that, as in so many things, Eliot's poem of pilgrimage and transcendence is a modernist response to Dante.

As has often been noted, we hear the echo of Dante's grand spiritual

pilgrimage throughout the *Four Quartets*. It is found explicitly in the line 'In the middle way, not only the middle of the way / But all the way, in a dark wood' of 'East Coker' II, coming tellingly at the close of a passage lamenting the 'intolerable wrestle with words and meanings', and the challenges of writing poetry in the shadow of powerful but suspect ancestral voices. Dante's shadow permeates 'Little Gidding', from the figurative language of Part I to the rhyme scheme and 'familiar compound ghost' of Part II to the multifoliate rose of Part V. Indeed, Eliot's entire canon of major poems is, to some degree, a modernist replication of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, beginning with the parody of *Inferno* in 'Prufrock', through *The Waste Land's* series of postcards from Dis, all the way to the merest hint of *Paradiso* as the goal of the pilgrimage begun in 'Ash Wednesday' and revisited at 'Burnt Norton'. 'Little Gidding', despite its vision of the fire and the rose becoming one, is not *Paradiso* – unlike Dante, Eliot never gets that far. The final section of *Four Quartets* mirrors the last few books of *Purgatorio*, an earth-bound prospect from which the potential, always future, aim of the pilgrimage can be vaguely glimpsed. There is confidence in the glimpse that 'we shall not cease from exploration'.

Four Quartets, then, delineates an account of a purgatorial pilgrimage. Like the *Divine Comedy*, presents to us encounters with the dead, the many ghosts around which Craig Raine shaped his recent discussion of the poem. Not all of Eliot's transcendent 'moments in and out of time' are explicit encounters with the dead, but many are, and the experience in the rose garden at Burnt Norton is, and this experience serves as a template for all such experiences of 'too much reality' alluded to later in the poem. The transcendent moment in the rose garden is a double experience. Part of it is perception of form, a version of the sublime in which the fragmentary – the broken and empty pool, the burnt house – is supplemented to a point of overwhelming excess. Part of it is temporal, in which the subject is allowed a glimpse of what the simultaneity of Time – the topic of the opening lines – might look like. The effect is that of a brief communion with the eternal, and with the dead, whose ghosts moved 'as our guests, accepted and accepting', drawing Eliot's pilgrim-persona into a fleeting pavane of past and present.

As Dante uses his encounters with the dead to find those truths that will serve to redeem his own spiritual defects, so too does Eliot's pilgrim. The diseases of the soul addressed are different in *Four Quartets* than they are in *Purgatorio*, since the religious paradigms of the respective centuries bear little resemblance to each other. Dante has a relatively easy go of it, having

only to deal with Seven Deadly Sins for a readership still comfortable with such language and concepts, while Eliot has to deal with all the soul-shrivelling conditions of the modernist moment. What both of these elements, formal and temporal, share is an Idealist set of metaphysical assumptions: the broken pool is less real than the pool filled with water out of sunlight; the moment in time, isolated as 'present only', is less real than the moment of past, present and future together, the moment in which 'we move, and they'. Indeed, it is more reality than humankind can bear. The end these moments serve, however, is the very reflection and remembering that constitutes the *idem*-identity's function; apprehending the 'reality' of the 'moment in the rose garden' of 'Burnt Norton', which is both in and out of time. This same reconstituting of meaning through temporal reflection pertains to self-understanding, as in the enigmatic passage where the speaker claims to be at once the same and to know himself, and yet is 'someone other', in the Dawn Patrol episode of 'Little Gidding'. Remembrance and self-knowledge are only available to the durable self; ghosts are the quintessence of that durability.

And yet, 'Dry Salvages' provides a caveat about change as linear pilgrimage, where development is seen as 'a means of disowning the past'. Of course this is not a dismissal of the progress of the soul. Indeed, it is a rejection of the 'Burnt Norton' II cynicism regarding ancestors and age, marking as it does at least one insight that comes with the wisdom of age, and is not to be taken ironically. The totality of the *Quartets* affirms the possibility of spiritual illumination or at least insight, and the matter at stake in the above passage is the danger of abstracting the present from its ultimately narrative context: 'disowning the past', as it were. Here, I think Eliot is fully in agreement with Ricoeur and so-called virtue ethicists such as Alasdair MacIntyre, that the meaning of any moment and any action must be grounded in narrative. Any action is intelligible only once it is re-situated in a before and after. We are left with a pilgrim-self under radical and continuous reconstituting, but one which also carries with it the understanding that 'many generations' are involved when meaning is reconstituted, not just the 'experience of one life'. This suggests a continuity of Selfhood to accompany the instability of a Self always re-writing itself.

The rewriting of the Self is necessitated by the encounter with each new experience. But not all experiences are created equal, according to Eliot, and Jean-Luc Marion seems to concur in his theory of 'saturated phenomena'. One of the primary features of the pilgrimage delineated in *Four Quartets* is that it is mapped by occasional and isolated 'unattended

moments'. I have already mentioned several of these framed by Eliot, but the fullest account of these 'phenomenal-events' is found in 'Dry Salvages', II and V. These moments of perception apprehend the 'point of intersection of the timeless with time'. While we ordinarily associate such visions only with mystics and saints, we are told here that these moments are, in the final analysis, not the product of a holy occupation, but a gift 'given and taken'. True, they may correspond to a life lived in a particular way, a life of 'ardour and self-surrender', but for the uncloistered pilgrim of this poem, these moments come as an 'unattended moment, the moment in and out of time'. The forms of the phenomena are stark in both their ordinariness and their diversity: they are natural as well as artificial – wild thyme or winter lightning being as likely a source as music. But they all share their concentration on perception. These accounts posit a transaction between the subject and object, and sometimes this transaction can be so profound as to blur and undoubtedly alter the identity of the perceiver. The experiences of music itself – 'you are the music' – like all moments in and out of time, are not themselves durable, nor can they ever be entire and unto themselves. They are, and can only be, 'hints and guesses' of something only half-understood, only half-perceived. In other words, for Eliot, such moments are transcendent rather than the experience of something immanent in the thing itself. On this point, Eliot and Marion seem to differ markedly.

However, as for the experience of these phenomena themselves, Eliot's catalogue of intense experiences, from smelling thyme on a walk in the country⁴ to this remarkable description of an encounter with music, align more or less with Marion's 'saturated phenomenon', a concept described in his magisterial book, *Being Given*. It is suggestive that Eliot uses the language of givenness in the passage discussed above, although it may be that he and Marion are indeed using the term somewhat differently. Marion is very cautious to disclaim a transcendent Giver beyond the phenomena; Eliot has no such qualms. God is mentioned rarely in *Four Quartets*, only once directly, but the divine and the eternal are not an embarrassment to Eliot in these poems. *Incarnation* in 'Dry Salvages' V may refer in part to the subject who experiences both time and timelessness, but it is capitalized because of its archetypal correspondence to the sacramental Incarnation of Christ.

Nevertheless, Marion's discussion of the phenomenology of such experiences may illuminate the event Eliot's poem represents to us. First, Marion stresses the centrality of 'givenness' to phenomenology. Whereas Husserl reduced phenomena to ideal categories, and Heidegger reduced

phenomena to Being, Marion posits a further reduction to givenness, driven by the conviction that phenomena must first present themselves via intuition to subjects who do not properly constitute the apparition of the phenomenon, but 'receive' it. 'What *shows itself* first *gives itself* – this is my one and only theme'.⁵ For Marion, phenomenology – whose first principle now must be 'so much reduction, so much givenness'⁶ – is a *method* only insofar as it designs its own disappearance; we attend to a phenomenon, or reduce it to Givenness, only to reveal the necessity of not reducing, or constituting, or objectifying at all, but to merely receiving what the phenomenon gives. Thus the intense attention of reduction, when it has completed its task, gives way to pure reception through inattention. There are clearly implications for the self in this approach:

as soon as the reduction has suspended and givenness is accomplished without reserve or limits, the I must renounce every claim to the synthesis of objects or the judgment of phenomenology. In the realm of givenness, it no longer decides the phenomenon, but receives it; or else, from 'master and possessor' ... [it becomes] its receiver.⁷

This Marion calls a 'radically new posture of the figure and the function of the I', the function of 'being gifted', which must be kept in mind in any consideration of the 'saturated phenomenon'.

This concept is a response to Kant's approach to delimiting intuition received from an object as either adequate to it, in terms of several defining horizons, or deficient. Marion asks if we cannot imagine – under the conditions of genuinely receiving – the possibility of a third relationship between intuition and concept, or intuition and phenomenon, that being one of Excess. He believes Kant himself flirted with this idea in his discussion of 'the aesthetic idea', which Kant says, 'occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought' to emerge, and about which 'no language fully attains to or makes intelligible'. At this point Marion summarizes the project of advancing his version of the aesthetic idea, the 'saturated phenomenon':

I must describe the characteristics of a phenomenon that, in contrast to the majority of phenomena, poor in intuition or defined by the ideal adequation of intuition to intention, would receive a surplus of intuition, therefore of givenness, over and above intention, the concept and the intended ... such a saturated phenomenon will no doubt no longer constitute an object (at least in the Kantian sense) for it is not

self-evident that objectivity has enough authority to impose its norm on the phenomenon. What shows itself gives itself before being objectified, and it would never even become an object if it was not first given, be it only in a basic and humble way. We must therefore follow as far as possible the hypothesis of a phenomenon saturated with intuition.⁸

Following Kant, Marion explores what the implications would be for such a phenomenon with regard to its situation in the horizons of quantity, quality and according to its relations to other experiences. Each of these finds resonance in Eliot's objects of the 'unattended moment'.

With regard to Quantity, the saturated phenomenon is *unforeseeable*. Kant says that in any phenomenon there is either a commensurate value between the parts and whole or there is a deficiency in the whole. Objects that always find adequation between the parts and whole are predictable through extrapolation, but should an object – in its totality – supersede its parts, such excess would never be predictable. The very unforeseeability of the thing, says Marion, demands a reaction of amazement. Eliot's insistence in the *Four Quartets* on representing amazement in encounters with various kinds of rather mundane objects is in line with this notion of excessive quantity and unforeseeability. The moment in the rose garden at 'Burnt Norton' is the archetype within the poem of such events. A neglected garden, a drained pool, a shaft of sunlight – these scenes reveal alchemy producing amazement (an event unstageable, unpredictable and unrepeatable). This too is the essence of the vision of Eliot's ancestors in 'East Coker', and the 'unimaginable Zero summer' of 'Little Gidding'.

In terms of Quality, Marion says the 'saturated Phenomenon' is *unbearable*:

[T]he intuition saturating a phenomenon attains an intensive magnitude without measure ... Before this excess, not only can perception no longer anticipate what it will receive from intuition; it also can no longer bear its most elevated degrees. For intuition, supposedly 'blind' in the realm of poor or common phenomena, turns out in radical phenomenology, to be blinding. The gaze cannot any longer sustain a light that bedazzles and burns. The intensive magnitude of intuition, when it goes so far as to give a saturated phenomenon, cannot be borne by the gaze, just as the gaze could not foresee its extensive magnitude.⁹

Such a description is reminiscent of classical and romantic descriptions of the Sublime – or of Abbot Suger's famous explorations of the spiritual function of the Beautiful. Clearly this sort of overwhelming bedazzlement was of enduring interest to the post-conversion Eliot. A line he wrote originally for *Murder in the Cathedral* turns up again wholesale in the opening tableau of the rose garden at Burnt Norton, after the exposure to the transcendent has been given and has receded. The perfect connection between 'reality' and 'intuition' is perhaps akin to Kant's principle of adequation, but in Eliot and Marion, 'the filling goes beyond itself: it goes to the brink, then too far. Thus the glory of the visible weighs down with all it has, that is to say it weighs too much. What is here weighty to the point of making one suffer is named neither unhappiness, or pain, nor lack, but indeed success – glory, joy'.¹⁰

There is one last element in Marion's sketch of the saturated phenomenon: it is without relation – absolute. 'It evades any analogy of experience.' For a poet as allusive as Eliot, to prohibit analogy would present some difficulty. Certainly, the moment in the rose garden is not only unstageable and unrepeatable but also unprecedented in any specific sense. However, in the *Quartets*, as in all of Eliot's poetry, images are situated in a network of traditional and analogical meanings. The *Four Quartets* are laced with the language, signs and metaphors of religious devotion and doubt, wide-ranging as they may be, from Julian of Norwich to the *Bhagavad-Gita*. More than anything else, they are haunted by the presence of the *Divine Comedy*. But these antecedents are the cultural associations from which poetry can never be free and isolated. As Eliot argued about Dante's language, they contextualize the poetic attempt to represent this experience of phenomenon, not the phenomenon as such. Marion's 'absolute' element in fact relocates our phenomenological event in time:

Event, or unforeseeable phenomenon (in terms of the past), not exhaustively comprehensible (in terms of the present), not reproducible (in terms of the future), in short, absolute, unique, coming forward. It will be said: pure event. As a result, the analogies of experience concern only the fringe of phenomenality – phenomena of the type of objects constituted by the sciences, poor in intuition, foreseeable, exhaustively knowable, reducible – while other levels (first of all historical phenomena) would make an exception.¹¹

Every moment in time is, of course, uniquely new, but the magnitude of

some events pushes them past analogy. For instance, all historical events of magnitude are not only unique but in a sense unknowable in their actuality and entirety. Perhaps this is why moments like Charles I's retreat from Naseby become such powerful and evocative moments in Eliot's account of pilgrimage. The grace found in *Four Quartets* is in the suggestion that such magnitude can be found in utterly mundane moments, unworthy of historical notice. The 'sudden illumination' described in 'Dry Salvages' II cannot be equated with 'a very good dinner' but good dinners are not excluded from possibly being such 'moments of happiness'. They may or may not be as absolute as the Battle of Austerlitz, but they may be just as capable of bedazzlement.

Moments of happiness and insight come unexpectedly, and they take one out of oneself. It is the return to oneself, however, and recollection of experience that allows the pilgrim soul to find meaning in experience. Having the experience but missing the meaning demands that through recollection and reflection the experience is moved 'beyond any meaning we can assign to happiness'. As has been noted, the unbearable element of Marion's analysis should not be called either happiness or pain, but rather *Joy* or *Glory*. 'Dry Salvages' locates this strange Joy firmly in an ethical context, as the pilgrim soul looks past the wild thyme and the winter lightning and even the very good dinner to compassion for the suffering of other people, who 'change, and smile: but the agony abides'. Suffering has its own transcendent permanence, in oneself as well as in others, but it is in bearing witness to suffering in others – that is, in receiving suffering (astonishingly, like a gift!) as a phenomenon of its own – that it too can become transcendent. In our own suffering we struggle to alleviate it, and that struggle forces upon us the focusing energy of resistance, denying us the insight of meaning. But often in the suffering of others we are helpless to do more than bear witness. Even in these moments, perhaps especially in these moments, the unbearable and the unforeseeable agony become the Dry Salvages themselves, a landmark that can help lay a course or that can cause a wreck, but which is in itself 'what it always was'.

For Marion, saturated phenomena give us an experience of something immanent to the phenomenon, contained within the phenomenon itself and not reliant on the nature of the perceiving subject, nor in a transcendent Other being made manifest in the transaction. It is effectively a one-way street. In an effort to write pure and postmodern philosophy, Marion is careful to disclaim any attempt to read into his theory of the 'saturated phenomenon' and of Givenness, a transcendental Giver: things give themselves. Eliot, however, feels free to situate in his poem a

transcendent Giver – an obscure and absconded Giver, perhaps, but something Other and Beyond that haunts the metaphysics of *Four Quartets*. In the *Quartets*, unattended moments are ‘hints and guesses, hints followed by guesses’ – they are not ends in and of themselves, nor are they autonomous things-unto-themselves, but rather they are pointers to another, and that Other is the Incarnation of the Logos. Eliot’s epiphanies are Icons of the Invisible, which Marion classes among his ‘versions of the saturated’, and which directed much of his earlier work. But despite Marion’s reticence about the transcendent giver, he does let Incarnation slip into his discussion of saturation in this echo of the Gospel of St John:

[T]here would appear a phenomenon saturated to the point that the world (in all senses of the word) could not accept it. Having come among his own, his own do not recognize it; having come into phenomenality, the absolutely saturated phenomenon could find no space for its display. But this denial of opening, therefore this disfiguring, still remains a manifestation.¹²

At the end of *Being Given*, Marion suggests where this all might lead, particularly by raising the question of ethics. If we subject-I’s are in fact ‘gifted receivers’ from all the alterity around us, could this be a route to reclaiming the dignity of terms such as gratitude and love as the foundations of moral agency? Eliot has no doubts on this topic: the path through Little Gidding, a place where ‘prayer has been valid’, leads ultimately to questions of right ‘action’. And those actions, he argues, are always grounded in the same transcendent Love that Dante found in his beatific vision of the ultimate saturated phenomenon. Moody finds the object of this Love, as it resides in the pilgrim Soul, somewhat obscure, but Raine seems to feel it is of a piece with Eliot’s other religious writings, which betray an ‘unbiddable intransigence of sincere belief’.¹³ Love is less the feeling inside that moves the pilgrim to search than it is the absolute and ideal goal of the pilgrimage, it is the beatific vision. On this point, Eliot stands with Dante, his essential medievalism well intact.

A further point on which Eliot and Marion may differ lies in the reaction of the pilgrim-subject to these encounters with saturated phenomena. There are suggestions in Marion that the perceiver should become increasingly (entirely?) passive as eventually even the need for reduction is done away with. In other places, he suggests, as his translators have pointed out, that the event is ‘endless’ in that ‘its hermeneutic can never be completed’.¹⁴ Eliot’s pilgrim-persona, on the other hand, engages