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'The Fire and the Rose are One': The Coherence of the Prophetic Voice in the Poetry of T. S. Eliot

Matthew Fairman
Clemson University, fairman@g.clemson.edu

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Matthew Joseph Fairman
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Catherine E. Paul, Committee Chair
Arthur P. Young
Wayne K. Chapman
Contrary to much scholarship on T. S. Eliot’s poetry, I argue that Eliot’s work cannot be divided into the two separate categories of before and after *The Waste Land*. While most of the imagery of Eliot’s earlier poems admittedly tends to be much darker than that of his later poems, it is irresponsible to disregard the general bent of the entirety of Eliot’s poetry in order to claim that this difference in imagery reflects a total transformation of Eliot’s message from one of strict pessimism to one of faith in the Anglican religion. Rather, much biographical and textual evidence shows that both *The Waste Land* and the *Four Quartets* take part in the same tradition, with Eliot always keeping the same prophetic aim in mind, that is to awaken a spiritual consciousness in his readers. By examining the influences of Eliot’s early studies in pre-reformation Catholicism and medieval Christian mysticism (culminating around 1914), I illustrate the continuing importance of each in both of Eliot’s long poems. Most important to my study is the clear and abiding influence of one particular modern work on Christian Mysticism: Evelyn Underhill’s *Mysticism: The Preeminent Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (1911). Analyzing Underhill’s work along with *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets* brings to light strong thematic similarities regarding ideas on Christian Mysticism that are present in both of Eliot’s greatest poems.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TITLE PAGE ....................................................................................................................i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT .....................................................................................................................ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ....................................................................................................iii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER

I. AN INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT FOR THE ARGUMENT .......... 1

II. “GIVE YOURSELF UP”................................................................. 26
   - Mysticism’s influence on The Waste Land ............................................. 26
   - An analysis of the poem’s calls to spiritual illumination ..................... 47

III. “THERE IS NO END BUT ADDITION”:  
    - Reading Four Quartets after The Waste Land ................................. 58
    - Conclusion ............................................................................................. 75

WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED ................................................................. 78
CHAPTER ONE
AN INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT FOR THE ARGUMENT

Throughout his poetic career, T. S. Eliot maintained an acute sensitivity to the barren spiritual condition of his contemporary society, and he repeatedly sought to fulfill a prophetic role in his major poetic works by alerting readers to their lack of spiritual consciousness. A. D. Moody, using much of Eliot’s own wording, gives a particularly helpful explanation of this “negative” aspect of Eliot’s subject matter:

because his [Eliot’s] culture was alien to his spirit, he was driven to devote much of his energy to what he termed “the negative aspect of the impulse toward the pursuit of beauty”—that is, to the intensification of the “death motive . . . the loathing and horror of life itself.” . . . Yet in the best of the finished work the sickness is transformed by the positive aspect of the impulse towards the ideal. The difference this makes is the strange and shocking one of his insisting all the more upon sickness and death, only not as the ultimate reality, but as the necessary way to eternal health and life. His positive is not a turning away from the negative, but a passing through it. (italics mine, xiv-xv)

In The Waste Land and Four Quartets, Eliot often focuses on the negative as he seeks to point a wayward generation to the knowledge of its sick, dying condition so that it might repent and again gain access to God through potent forms of spirituality. Though worked out in an astonishing variety of techniques and with very different imagery, both poems
essentially elaborate on the same issue, with Eliot always keeping the same prophetic aim in mind, that is to awaken a spiritual consciousness in his readers.

However, much scholarship concerning the poetry of T. S. Eliot insists on separating his work into two separate categories, before and after The Waste Land. In T. S. Eliot: Four Quartets, Daniel O’Connor espouses precisely such a division when he argues for two ways of separating Eliot’s work:

Another way of dividing the poetry is by subject matter, that of the earlier poems being concerned with a profoundly pessimistic view of life, while that of the later reflects Eliot’s recovery, or discovery of faith. This division is reflected in the imagery, the earlier poetry having, characteristically, an urban imagery, the later a sort of religious symbolism. (4)

O’Connor goes on to suggest a further division in which “Gerontion,” The Waste Land, “The Hollow Men,” and “Sweeney Agonistes” are all lumped together under the subcategory of “dark” poems, while “Ash Wednesday,” “The Rock,” and Four Quartets are labeled as earlier and later “Christian” poems (5-6).

While most of the imagery of Eliot’s earlier poems admittedly tends to be much darker than that of his later poems, it is irresponsible to disregard the general bent of the entirety of Eliot’s poetry in order to claim that this difference in imagery reflects a total transformation of Eliot’s message from one of strict pessimism to one of faith in the Anglican religion. Assuming this type of total transformation of subject matter ignores aspects of Eliot’s poems that show the poet’s belief in the profound interconnectedness of
“dark” imagery and a “recovery” or “discovery” of faith, and such a division cannot stand in light of Eliot’s consistent tendency to emphasize the need and value of a “pessimistic” view of the strictly materialistic life of much contemporary society. Indeed, Eliot knew that without a critical consciousness of the materialistic nature of modern existence, he and his readers would remain “Dull roots” buried in the “forgetful snow” of a barren winter, without possibility of an awakening to fruitful life, and they would content themselves with a life of being “distracted from distraction by distraction” (WL 4-6; BN III, 101\(^1\)). Here, I propose that in both The Waste Land and Four Quartets, the poet assumes that the “dark” imagery of sin, futility, spiritual alienation, and waste must be confronted and explored in order to understand the possibility of an awakening to spiritual consciousness.

In the following chapters of this study, I analyze the ways in which both of Eliot’s long poems fulfill the essentially prophetic role of alerting readers to their wasted spiritual condition and subsequently offering a means of restoration with potent spirituality. As already suggested, I focus the brunt of my argument on The Waste Land and Four Quartets, but I also plan to briefly examine spiritual or Christian aspects of

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earlier poems to further establish the claim that Eliot’s poems were unified in their prophetic aim.

In order to highlight the reasoning behind the reading of Eliot’s poetry offered above, it is necessary to establish a context from which to approach the poems. I provide such a context in this first chapter of my study by laying a groundwork of initial research that deals with two key background topics: a brief treatment of another Eliot scholar who argues for the unity and coherence of Eliot’s poetry; and the progression, in Eliot’s biography, of his moral, spiritual, and philosophical beliefs, as related to his exploration of human darkness and its effects. Although at first glance, these concepts may appear unrelated, an understanding of the first idea will help to establish a critical basis from which to continue filling out the argument that Eliot’s poems should be treated as a unified whole. An understanding of the second idea will show that a prophetic purpose for *The Waste Land* and following poems becomes likely in light of Eliot’s ideas on the need for an exploration of sin and its remedies at the time he began his classic work.

In establishing the biographical context for the spiritual aim of Eliot’s poetry leading up to *The Waste Land*, I particularly emphasize an essential and often overlooked influence on Eliot: his studies in Christian Mysticism. Lyndall Gordon’s biography suggests that Eliot was especially influenced by one particular text on Christian Mysticism—that is, Evelyn Underhill’s *Mysticism: The Preeminent Study in the Nature and Development of the Spiritual Consciousness* (1911). Accordingly, I devote a great deal of attention to this source, noting particularly that Underhill’s view of mysticism, and the mystics which she cites as models, influenced Eliot’s study early in his poetic
career and continued to influence his poetry progressively more leading up to the composition of *Four Quartets*. Until now, little has been said concerning Underhill’s influence on *The Waste Land*, while much more critical attention has been focused on the more explicit influence of mysticism on *Four Quartets*. However, I suggest that examining this influence will shed a great deal of light on spirituality in *both* of Eliot’s greatest poems and will further the argument that *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets* demonstrate a unity of prophetic aim.

First, in order to establish a critical basis for analyzing the unity of Eliot’s work, I must mention the work of a particular scholar whose criticism cannot be left out of any argument proposing to demonstrate such a unity—that is, Morris Weitz’s “T. S. Eliot: Time as a Mode of Salvation.” Like Lyndall Gordon, Weitz argues that “the contention that Eliot’s work somehow divides itself into the two periods of before and after *The Waste Land* will have to be rejected” (Bergonzi 142). However, Weitz takes up a very different line of logic in arguing for the unity of Eliot’s poetry. A brief digression into the nature of Weitz’s argument will be necessary in order to establish the full relevance of his argument to the claim proposed here.

Weitz’s argument is essential to the groundwork of my thesis for two basic reasons. First, in defining what he calls Eliot’s “immanence doctrine of time,” Weitz offers a useful utterance of Eliot’s view of spiritual reality that will illuminate his poems’ prophetic role by defining, at least partially, the reality to which Eliot hoped his readers would awaken. Second, and perhaps most importantly, Weitz proves that Eliot had established this particular view early in his poetic career and that, accordingly, Eliot’s
poems do not separate into two separate stages. The value of Weitz’s argument to this thesis cannot be overstated, as it was his idea—namely that Eliot’s poetry is unified by a Christian philosophy of time—that provided the impetus for my examination of the influences who Eliot drew from in order to establish this philosophy and led me to the conclusion that *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, in demonstrating the impact of those influences, function primarily as prophetic poems that call for a spiritual awakening. For the purposes of this argument, Weitz’s working out of the immanence doctrine in “Prufrock” presents further evidence of the strong, early, and abiding influence of Christian Mysticism in Eliot’s work.

Following is a brief summary of relevant aspects of Weitz’s position. In “T. S. Eliot: Time as a Mode of Salvation,” Weitz focuses mainly on Eliot’s notion of time in the *Four Quartets*. However, he suggests, quite convincingly, that this particular notion of time had already been developed by Eliot’s writing of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” In defining Eliot’s notion of time, he argues that Eliot uses the Heraclitean theory of time (“The way up is the way down, the way forward is the way back”) as an epigraph to *Four Quartets* in order to repudiate “its insistence upon the ultimate character of time as flux” (Bergonzi 139). Rather than insisting on a theory in which “the temporal is the ultimate reality,” says Weitz, Eliot posits his own Christian “immanence doctrine of time,” in which he argues that “within the flux the choice is always the same, either death or God; and that, if we deny God, Who is the Timeless, the Eternal, all experiences are worth nothing” (emphasis mine, 142). Further, “the Timeless is regarded as the creative source of the flux,” and “the flux . . . is taken as real but its reality is derived
from and sustained by the more ultimate reality of the Eternal. The flux is not an illusion but it is an illusion to regard it as the only reality” (142). Not only does Weitz argue that this Christian immanence doctrine of time is “the fundamental idea” of Four Quartets, but he goes on to show how the same idea is “already worked out in ‘Prufrock’” (142).

Beginning his analysis of “Prufrock,” Weitz notes that “both Eliot and Matthiessen have repudiated the notion, advanced by I. A. Richards, that Eliot became a religious poet after The Waste Land” (142). To further repudiate that notion, Weitz argues that “‘Prufrock’ is a deeply religious poem,” based on its demonstration of the immanence doctrine of time. To define this doctrine, as it is plays out in Eliot’s first major poem, Weitz explains that time in “Prufrock” essentially divides into two types: “true time and false time. False time has to do with those experiences that get nowhere, like the aimless streets of Prufrock’s wanderings” (143). In support of this assertion, he cites the third stanza, suggesting that it describes “a time which seems to allow for everything but actually for nothing” since it only ends up turning back on itself.

This false time is not to be seen by the critic as wholly negative. Rather, asserts Weitz, a true time—“time that encompasses significant experiences” and has “purpose and direction”—is “immanent” in false time (143). This is true because, in “Prufrock,” all time, that which leads to significant actions and that which essentially leads nowhere, necessarily leads to the same overwhelming question:

Just as the streets of the first stanza do lead to the overwhelming question, so the insignificant in human experience does embody, as one of its dimensions, the significant. […] This is the meaning of the lines: ‘And
time for all the works and days of hands / That lift and drop a question on
your plate.’ All experiences, from creation to murder (death), contain as
their ultimate dimension the overwhelming question. (143)

Thus, Weitz argues that the concluding stanza of the poem, in which Prufrock says “we
have lingered in the chambers of the sea,” speaks again of false time, time spent “in a
limbo-like trance of doing nothing” and proposes that the implication is that we “have
been near the sources of salvation,” and we “will remain there until we cease our state of
mere physical existence, of ‘death-in-life,’ and attain our spiritual rebirth” (144).

Accordingly, suggests Weitz, an overall interpretation of “Prufrock” “is offered through
the concept of immanence” (144). “Prufrock,” then, is a definite precursor to Eliot’s two
long poems, because it comments on developing the spiritual consciousness as a response
to an ultimately unsatisfying, secular modern life.

In addition to evidence offered in Weitz’s essay concerning the immanence
doctrine of time in “Prufrock,” other sections of the poem may be worth noting. For
instance, knowledge of this two-fold division of time seems also to be the source of
Prufrock’s self-conscious questions about the essential worth of the time he has spent or
that he might spend.

And would it have been worth it, after all,

After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,

Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,

Would it have been worth while,

To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it toward some overwhelming question . . . . (“Prufrock” 87-93)
Also absent in Weitz’s evidence are other lines that seem even more explicitly to be referring to the futile essence of this false time:

For I have known them all already, known them all—

Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,

I have measured out my life in coffee spoons . . . . (49-51)
In these lines, the would-be prophet, looking back at his use of time, describes it in terms of coffee spoons, an image decidedly connotative of insignificance. Here, in “Prufrock,” is a precursor to the same futility that, as Tiresias the seer can understand, is the essence of the “violet hour, the evening hour that strives / Homeward” in that most repulsive of sex scenes between the “young man carbuncular” and the “typist home at teatime” in The Waste Land (44). Significantly, this is a scene that can be summed up by the “lovely woman” in one line, heavy with meaning: “Well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over . . . .” (44)
And here, in what is seen as false time in “Prufrock,” is the precursor to that “waste sad time” at the conclusion of “Burnt Norton” (122).

In order to understand how this essentially Christian philosophy of time evolved in Eliot’s mind and came to be worked out in each of Eliot’s greatest poems from “Prufrock” to Four Quartets, it will be necessary to examine relevant biographical context. My analysis of Eliot’s biography focuses on the development of his moral, spiritual, and philosophical beliefs, as related to his growing willingness to assert spiritual
truth, and on his exploration of suffering, futility, and their effects. I argue that each of these aspects of Eliot’s biography coalesce to demonstrate his burgeoning mystic consciousness. The analysis offered here, drawing from Lyndall Gordon’s *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* and A. D. Moody’s *Thomas Stearns Eliot: Poet*, will confirm that the progress of Eliot’s spiritual life was directed early on by the influence of Christian mysticism and pre-reformation Catholicism and will show that by the time Eliot was writing *The Waste Land*, he had reached a stage of spiritual consciousness from which he could fulfill a prophetic role by evoking in his readers a shocking realization of their spiritual blindness. This analysis will show that Eliot, even as early in his career as 1911, felt “a latent prophetic power . . . [he] could not quite grasp or express” and that this power stemmed from Eliot’s “overwhelming need to question a drably abhorrent world based on attrition” (Gordon 65).

In her introduction, Lyndall Gordon calls Eliot’s life an “insistent search for salvation” and goes on to explain that those who would see Eliot as “a disillusioned sophisticate who suddenly turned Christian” miss the fact that, “approached as a whole, Eliot’s story has an extraordinary coherence” (x). A. D. Moody, makes a similar argument, noting that Eliot’s formal conversion only enforced the “natural development” of his poetry and that “Even in the matter of belief it amounted, at most, to a move from a heretical to an orthodox form of Christianity” (13). Closer study of Eliot’s life reveals the veracity of both of these assertions.

Though Eliot spent the majority of his childhood in St. Louis, he is inextricably linked through a proud heritage to the New England elite. Eliot’s grandfather, a widely
known and beloved Unitarian minister, held great sway over the spiritual and moral life of the Eliots. While William Greenleaf Eliot influenced his grandson’s ideas on morality significantly, the Unitarian spirituality that he practiced never satisfied Thomas. Gordon notes that Eliot, “in his revival of ideas of depravity and damnation, and in his craving for orthodoxy,” exhibited important differences from his “Unitarian upbringing” (20). Indeed, Eliot preferred a morality of strong convictions based on stable spiritual truth to the faith of his Unitarian family and struggled to find and define such spiritual reality for most of his life. In his family’s Unitarianism, a religion that “was strict rather than spiritual” and that was not “concerned with perfection, or doctrine, or theology, but with a code that would better the human lot,” Eliot saw a watering down of the Catholic Christianity of his more remote ancestors (18). This particular type of Unitarianism “retained puritan uprightness, social conscience, and self-restraint, but . . . had been transformed by the Enlightenment” (18). In reaction to his upbringing, Eliot “sought an older, stricter discipline, unsoftened by twentieth-century liberalism” (21). Eliot himself later made a telling remark about the essential difference from the beliefs he would come to espouse and his Family’s type of Christianity: “I was brought up outside the Christian fold, in Unitarianism” (qtd. in Moody 12). According to A. D. Moody, Eliot became progressively more dissatisfied with what he termed as Unitarianism’s “‘intellectual and puritanical rationalism’, being convinced ‘that the supernatural is the greatest here and now’” (13). In other words, it seems that Eliot could not rely on Unitarianism to explain what he perceived as the overwhelming presence of sin and suffering in life.
Eliot later found his most preferred form of a stricter discipline of Christianity in pre-reformation Catholicism as he came to understand it in his reading about Saints of the medieval Church and especially in his reading on Christian Mysticism. Here, it may be helpful to see a brief description, in Eliot’s own words, of the Catholicism that he was headed towards defining for himself. As Gordon notes,

Eliot craved a stronger, more dogmatic theological structure than was to be found in his own ethical background. Associating his parents’ injunctions about ‘what is done and not done’ with Puritanism, he scribbled on the back of an envelope in about 1923 or 1924: ‘There are only two things—Puritanism and Catholicism. You are one or the other. You either believe in the reality of sin or you don’t—that is the important moral distinction—not whether you are good or bad. Puritanism does not believe in sin: it merely believes that certain things must not be done.’ (213)

In Eliot’s years as a student at Harvard and on into the rest of his life, he would certainly do a great deal of thinking and writing about the “reality of sin” as he shed many remnants of the liberal-mindedness of his Unitarian family and began to formulate his own spiritual and moral beliefs.

In 1910, notes Gordon, Eliot underwent the “beginning of a religious ferment and a rebellion against the world’s conspiracy to tie him to its lifeless customs” (45). This ferment and rebellion was at the very least a partial result of an “indescribable Silence” that Eliot experienced in June of 1910 at his graduation: “Suddenly able to shed the
world, he experienced a fugitive sense of peace that he would try all his life to recapture” (49). Gordon notes that this “‘Silence’ was the forerunner of later beatific moments in Eliot’s work,” and explains that “in each case it seems to him he has received some kind of message that disperses and obliterates ordinary reality” (49). I believe that Eliot later found a satisfactory explanation of this moment of clarity when he read Underhill’s descriptions of the awakening of the Spiritual consciousness in Mysticism. Understanding Underhill’s description, therefore, helps readers of Eliot grasp what exactly he made of his experiences of “silence.” Underhill argues that awakening of the spiritual consciousness “must not [. . .] be confused or identified with religious conversion as ordinarily understood: the sudden and emotional acceptance of theological beliefs which the self had previously rejected” or treated as irrelevant (176). Rather, quoting Starbuck’s The Psychology of Religion, Underhill notes that this awakening of the consciousness which marks the beginning of its journey from lower to higher levels of reality “is primarily an unselfing” in which the person ceases to be totally controlled by “deep-seated instincts of self-preservation and self-enlargement” and finds that a “larger world-consciousness [is] now pressing in on the individual consciousness” (177). This awakening, says Underhill, “usually involves a sudden and acute realization of a splendor and adorable reality in the world—or sometimes of its obverse, the divine sorrow at the heart of things—never before perceived” (178). Eliot seems to be of the temperament which more readily recognized the presence of the “divine sorrow,” yet his experience is easily describable as a mystical awakening of the spiritual consciousness. It is this quasi-mystical experience that Lyndall Gordon says “remained the defining
experience of his life,” and, as Gordon further suggests, his experiences in the Spring of 1910 marked the “beginning of Eliot’s religious journey” (49). As both The Waste Land and the Four Quartets describe similar visions of “silence,” knowing that Eliot was prone to such intense moments of spiritual clarity and knowing what they might look like in words proves very important to understanding the influence of Christian mysticism on his later work.

After graduating from Harvard in 1910, Eliot spent much of 1911 abroad in Paris, critically examining both the French philosophical scene and the decadence of the Parisian streets. In his time in Paris, Eliot met with one of his earliest and strongest philosophical influences: Henri Bergson. Bergson, “‘the most noticed figure’” in French philosophy at the time, was conducting a series of lectures on personality and on the philosophy of Spinoza which condensed ideas previously published by Bergson in Creative Evolution, a book which Eliot remarked “had deeply influenced his intellectual development” (Moody 26). In fact, Eliot would admit much later, in 1948, to experiencing “‘a temporary conversion to Bergsonism’” (26-7). Moody offers a cogent description of Eliot’s early acceptance and his later criticism of Bergson’s ideas:

What he took from Bergson, and used in his poetry right up to Four Quartets, was a way of thinking about certain problems of the mind in time, together with the conclusion that Bergson’s answer to them would not do.

Bergson’s durée reelle is ‘simply not final’, he wrote in a philosophy essay in 1911. [ . . . For Eliot,] Bergson figured as a
representative of the romantic tendency in France in 1910: that is, as one
whose *vitalism* encouraged ‘escape from the world of fact’ and disbelief in
Original Sin, doubtless Eliot’s final fact would be Death, first fruit of
Original Sin. (26)

In addition to this objection, which already seems based in a bias towards Christian
time, Eliot would go on to raise other objections to Bergsonism based on his
progressing tendency to identify with the Christian Mysticism of many pre-reformation
saints. In “A Paper on Bergson” written as early as 1913 or 1914, Eliot specifically stated
that he did not disagree with critic’s labeling of Bergson as a mystic, but that he took
issue with Bergson’s particular type of mysticism: “Bergson’s thought contains
‘suggestions [. . .] of leading toward an absolute; suggestions which have often led
Bergson’s critics to call him mystic. With this appellation I am not disposed to quarrel;
though [. . .] it is rather a *weakling mysticism* . . .’” (Childs 102). But to what type of
mysticism was Eliot comparing Bergson’s views? Based on Lyndall Gordon’s
examination of this particular period in Eliot’s development, I am disposed to agree with
Donald J. Childs who argues in his “T. S. Eliot: From Varieties of Mysticism to
Pragmatic Poesis” that, “for having set Bergson aside, he [Eliot] took up the study of
Christian mysticism, reading widely (as Gordon has shown) on the subject of Saints and
mystics during his final years at Harvard (1913-1914)” (102). It is precisely this study of
Christian mysticism, perhaps best encapsulated by Underhill, which provided Eliot with a
comprehensive statement of his developing world-view and allowed him to size up the
spiritual ailment present in himself and in others that his poems would seek to address.
As Gordon notes, Eliot had been an “inspector of vice” in Paris, exploring the “streets during those hours when they were deserted except for the occasional prostitute or starving cat” in order to experiment with the assertions of Bergson and “find some clue to the meaning of life” (58). Gordon locates the dismal results of this experiment in one of Eliot’s Parisian poems, “Rhapsody on a Windy Night”: “from a philosophical point of view, this experiment failed: the impressions do not converge; there is no intuition to be seized” (Gordon 59). After Eliot’s time abroad and his disillusionment with Bergsonism, he began to make a noticeable turn toward specifically Christian viewpoints.

Paris in 1911 turned out to be a prime opportunity for Eliot to begin substantiating his profound trust in the “reality of sin.” In Paris “it was less the sophisticated or innovative who interested Eliot, rather the prostitutes and maquereaux of the Boulevard Sebastopol, […] and the men who nosed after pleasure” (57). Eliot made a serious pastime out of slumming in Paris, allowing “lust and drunkenness to circle around him, so that he might contemplate with horror a life bereft of morale or dignity” (57). Whereas most of the poems characteristic of this period simply seem to demonstrate Eliot’s belief in existence as a “tortuous” path leading to no spiritual insight or resolution, some of the Parisian poems show the poet “edging beyond ‘Silence’ and ‘The First Debate [Between Body and Soul]’ towards a religious, even Christian, point of view” (61). Examples of such poems are the “2nd Debate Between Body and Soul” and “The Little Passion: An Agony in a Garret.” In the “2nd Debate,” “‘a ring of silence’ closes round” the speaker and “seals him off, in a state of beatific security, from the ‘floods of life’ that threaten to break like a wave against his skull”: 
Yet to burst out at last, ingenuous and pure

Surprised but knowing—it is a triumph not endurable to miss!

Not to set free the purity that clings

To the cautious midnight of its chrysalis

Nourished in earth and stimulated by manure.

--I am sure it is like this

I am sure it is this

I am sure. (qtd in Gordon 57)

So, even at an early stage, the philosopher/poet can envision a speaker, “Nourished in earth and stimulated by manure” to “burst out” into triumph (emphasis mine, 57). Here, it would appear that Eliot, as spectator of Parisian vice, is not far from his speaker, who is able to convert manure, a waste product seen here to have specific value, into the growth of wings. That the speaker repeats “I am sure” three times demonstrates his confidence in the validity of his emerging vision of the universe. Although not much else can easily be said about the nature of this spiritual world to which the “2nd Debate” alludes, the speaker is convinced of the existence of an overarching purity in the suffering world of flux and death.

A second Parisian poem, “The Little Passion,” offers significant insight into Eliot’s turning toward a Christian philosophy. Where a Bergsonist approach fails to conclude in intuition in “Rhapsody,” “The Little Passion” finds a decidedly more spiritualized resolution. It is while in Paris that Eliot pens these telling lines of verse which seem to comment on the lessons he desires to learn from his slumming:
Upon these stifling August nights
I know he used to walk the streets
Now following the lines of lights
Or diving into dark retreats

Or following the lines of lights
And knowing well to what they lead:
To one inevitable cross
On which our souls are pinned and bleed. (qtd. in Gordon 60)

Here, in Eliot’s early verse, one can already see the poet’s urge to construct a Christian resolution from the negative facts of urban, sensual life. It is significant that for this particular speaker, “The alternative, if he could reach it, is martyrdom” (60). Eliot seems to have had an idealist’s predilection for the Spiritual consequences of the materialistic life: the drunk speaker of “The Little Passion,” wrapped up in a sensual, essentially materialistic lifestyle, intuits another path in which he must die for the sake of Christ. Even this early in Eliot’s career, this lesson seems to be necessarily related to the Mystical Christian imagery of Mortification, a “gymnastic of the soul” that Evelyn Underhill defines as “a deliberate recourse to painful experiences and difficult tasks” (205). Eliot will soon find an influential confirmation for his tendency to identify modern human suffering with the suffering of Christ in his study of Christian Mysticism, particularly in Underhill’s Mysticism and its emphasis on the necessary place of suffering in the awakening of the spiritual consciousness.
After nine months in Paris and a brief visit to London, Eliot returned to Harvard to start graduate work in philosophy. But, as Gordon’s biography shows, he never quite found the answers he most desired in his typical philosophy classes, and consequently, he began to rely more heavily on religion: “Eliot’s main objection to his department was its divorce of philosophy from religion. He craved philosophy in an ampler sense—wisdom, insight, revelation” (85-6). To satisfy this craving, Eliot began to study representative works of eastern philosophy such as the Upanishads and the Bhagavad-Gita. At about the same period, Eliot also found what would become a life-long affinity for Dante, whose Inferno Eliot recognized as a record of the horrifying and real presence of sin permeating humanity. Perhaps this affinity for The Divine Comedy marked the beginning of, or grew as part of, a larger identification that Eliot was developing with medieval Christianity. Indeed, Gordon describes Eliot’s relation to Dante in a way that demonstrates a developing sense of fundamental tenants of the Christian mysticism practiced by many of the medieval saints and mystics with which Eliot was captivated. At the heart of this mysticism is an awakening to spiritual consciousness that takes the practitioner from lower to higher levels of consciousness of reality while necessarily moving through periods of suffering, purgation, and mortification in order to reach periods of illumination. More and more, this pattern of awakening appealed to Eliot. Gordon notes this in describing his attraction to Dante: “More important for him than any canto was the complete schema. For Eliot, as for Dante, there was to be no shortcut to paradise: he had to plumb the depths of hell and bear the ordeals of purgatory (85-86). Thus, it seems that Eliot recognized a kindred consciousness in Dante, who confronted the vice he saw
corrupting every part of his contemporary surroundings so that he could purge himself from it in order to gain access to paradise.

Here, in the period in which Eliot studied eastern and western religion, he was at the verge of a true turning point in his life in which he would come very close to a formal conversion. As hinted at above, this transition seems to have come largely as a result of Eliot’s growing fascination with the mind of saints in particular. While Gordon traces the origin of Eliot’s attraction to the saints and mystics to his mother’s religious poetry, she also makes it clear that Eliot devoted much time to an in-depth, personal study. Most important to my argument, and its proposal of an essentially spiritual message in The Waste Land, however, is Gordon’s mentioning of Eliot’s reading, during his study of saints and mystics, of a particularly comprehensive and influential source on Christian Mysticism. Around 1912, writes Gordon, “Eliot made copious notes from Evelyn Underhill’s Mysticism (1911)” (89). She goes on to suggest that this reading in Mysticism had both a profound immediate impact and, after a period of pessimism and nervous doubt in which Eliot would write The Waste Land, a long-lasting impact on Eliot’s poetry and his beliefs.

Gordon contends that this period, culminating in 1914 when Eliot seemed close to a formal conversion, marks the beginning of Eliot’s journey to develop the spiritual consciousness. That Eliot began writing a new type of explicitly religious poetry showing an evolving obsession with the ascetic way of purgation evidences the impact of his studies in Christian Mysticism. “In the new cluster, a bold convert, martyr or saint
displaces the frustrated philosopher of the 1911-1912. [. . .] There is a monastic impulse
[. . .] to take off for mountain or desert in search of initiation and purification. There is,
most persistently, a fantasy of a martyr’s passion” (87). Significantly, within several of
these poems—“After the Turning,” “I Am the Resurrection,” and “So through the
Evening”—are the origins of *The Waste Land*. They reveal a primary motive for its
creation: the confrontation and purging of the vanity of secular life.

Again, it is in the beginning of this phase that Eliot extensively annotated
Underhill’s treatise on mysticism. I suggest that this especially intense period of religious
rumination marks the beginning of Eliot’s Christian awakening to spiritual
consciousness, in which he became aware of a particular pattern of growth toward an
understanding—illumination, if you will—of the Absolute. In fact, I argue in my next
chapter that certain of the notes that Eliot made in *Mysticism* and much in the text of
*Mysticism* itself, will help to elucidate a prophetic strategy for *The Waste Land*. I argue
that Eliot depicts his own Dark Night of the Soul in order to bring about a reawakening to
spiritual illumination and that this progression of the spiritual consciousness plays out in
the death-and-resurrection sequences that proliferate in *The Waste Land*. Notes on
Underhill’s text made by Eliot and cited by Gordon help to introduce a logical basis for
this argument. For instance, Eliot noted “in 1912 that the Dark Night of the Soul is a
period of construction, not of negativity” (89). That Eliot highlighted ideas such as this
one concerning the constructive possibilities of doubt seems to suggest that he may have
been conscious of the necessity, in his own life and in the lives of any who would awaken
to the concept of a superior level of spiritual reality, of undergoing a wasteland
experience in order to develop along what Underhill calls “The Mystic Way.” This thought will suffice to lead us into an examination of Underhill’s influence on The Waste Land and the poem’s overall prophetic tone in Chapter Two of my study.

In my second chapter, I use the dual nature of the Mystic Way to offer a reading of The Waste Land that encompasses both the necessary presence of a great deal of “dark” imagery and of the more positive imagery of hope. In the progression along this Mystic Way, one’s perception is briefly awakened to perfect spiritual reality and then haunted by the relative vanity of human existence so that he must purge himself of attachment to it. This is the pattern Eliot repeats in The Waste Land. On the one hand, Eliot devotes a great deal of space in his poem to exposing the moral and spiritual morass that was his time. In doing so, he is not only attempting to force his readers to confront the futility of modern existence, but he is also attempting to force them to explore it through “intuitive sympathy” and to experience it for themselves, as he and other saints and mystics before him have had to do. For Eliot it is not enough to seek truth “through methodological enquiry;” rather, one might find it “only though intuitive sympathy” (Gordon 86). It is this sympathy which Eliot strives to evoke in much of his poetry, and he relies on it heavily in The Waste Land to awaken his readers. The Waste Land, as prophetic attempt at restoration, must drag the reader from the “warm” ignorance of his “winter” by evoking in him an actualization of his wasted condition, of his Dark Night of the Soul. This is a process likened in the poem to nature’s equally miraculous restoration: “breeding/ Lilacs out of the dead land” and “stirring dull roots with spring rain” (WL, 1-4).
After using Underhill’s Mysticism role to examine the presence of darkness in The Waste Land, I argue for the presence of the more commonly overlooked prophetic aim of Eliot’s prophetic poem: its call to truth. Certainly Eliot’s own spiritual doubts, his goal of evoking a disdain for the futility of modern existence, and the secularizing influence of his contemporaries muffle his explicit call to truth. A close analysis of The Waste Land, however, proves that the prophetic call to truth is certainly audible. In fact, the more commonly-overlooked passages of The Waste Land, those drawing on conventional forms of spirituality such as orthodox Christianity and Hinduism, explicitly reveal the means of restoration. In this section of my second chapter, I will offer a reading of the passages that deal explicitly with hope. Specifically, I will deal with the passage at the beginning of “The Burial of the Dead” which alludes to the Biblical Prophet Ezekiel, the allusion to St. Augustine at the close of “The Fire Sermon,” and the perilous chapel and Hindu spirituality found in “What the Thunder Said.” From these passages of The Waste Land, I will show that Eliot fulfills the prophetic role of proclaiming truth.

In my final chapter, I examine the development and final crystallization of the prophetic voice of Eliot’s poetry. My goal is to demonstrate a unity of prophetic aim from “dark” poems like The Waste Land, which spend more time exploring uselessness of the modern world of flux, to later poems like Four Quartets, which spend more time exploring the possibility of spiritual health. Accordingly, I examine portions of the Four Quartets to attempt to show that what I have previously treated as the restorative necessity of an exploration of futility in The Waste Land is reiterated in Eliot’s following
poems as an expression of the *via negativa*: the description of God or spiritual truth in terms of what it is not. This process of negation recurs as a motif to be elaborated upon throughout *Four Quartets* and presents, in another form, Eliot’s essentially Medieval Christian idea “that the thought of the intellectual believer ‘proceeds by rejection and elimination’ until he finds an explanation for both the disordered world without and the moral world within” (Gordon 211).

In the *Four Quartets*, the *via negativa*, the way you must go for restoration, bears striking resemblance to the dark place readers had to go in *The Waste Land*:

In order to arrive there,

To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,

You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.

In order to arrive at what you do not know

You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.

In order to possess what you do not possess

You must go by the way of dispossession. (EC III, lines 135-41)

It is precisely this emphasis on the positive application of the negative in the *Four Quartets* that creates a unity of theme with *The Waste Land*. Just as the poet of *The Waste Land* highlights spiritual sickness and death in order to get readers to arrive at what they do not know (that they are among the spiritually dying), so does the poet of the *Four Quartets* attempt to elucidate the fact that the path that has to be taken in order to arrive at eternal health runs directly through a waste land. In essence, Eliot’s *Four Quartets* show the reader what he was up to in devising such a dark poem as *The Waste*
Land. Just as Eliot himself, as burgeoning poet/prophet, had to confront and extensively observe the darkness of urban life in Paris and London in order to negate and reject it, so he wanted the reader to travel the same path, “a way wherein there is no ecstasy” (EC III, line 137). In order to possess what they did not possess—that is, a healthy spiritual condition—the reader had to go by the way of dispossession and rid himself of all that Eliot considered waste in the modern human condition.

In other words, my final chapter concludes that both of Eliot’s greatest poems argue that modern man must be humbled by being implicated in wrongs he did not know he was committing. The spiritual health that Eliot was seeking to bring to his readers depends on their humiliation. In light of the wisdom of the Four Quartets—“The only wisdom we can hope to acquire / is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless”—it is clear that humility is to be the direct consequence of traveling through The Waste Land and of knowing that modern existence is full of spiritual dearth. Indeed, it is only after confronting the darkness of modern existence and rejecting it, only after coming through the dark night of the soul that is recreated for readers in The Waste Land that one can fully appreciate that wisdom and offering of potent spirituality in the Four Quartets. Therefore, the two poems and the two seemingly different phases of Eliot’s career are unified in one, essential aim: connecting the reader with a means to spiritual health.
CHAPTER TWO
“GIVE YOURSELF UP”

Mysticism’s influence on The Waste Land

Published in 1911, Evelyn Underhill’s Mysticism describes itself as the preeminent study in the nature and development of the spiritual consciousness. In the book’s two sections, “The Mystic Fact” and “The Mystic Way,” Underhill examines mysticism in relation to vitalism, psychology, theology, symbolism, and magic and explores the awakening, purification, and illumination of the self. Ira Progoff, in his foreword to the text, provides a helpful summary of Underhill’s aim, to clarify and define the previously all-too-nebulous term “mysticism.” “Underhill follows the view,” says Progoff, “‘that mysticism in its pure form is a science of ultimates, the science of union with the absolute and nothing else, and that the mystic is the person who attains to this union, not the person who talks about it’” (vii). Thus, whether Eliot himself could be correctly called a “mystic” is debatable. Of course, proving that he was a mystic is not the point of my argument. I only want to demonstrate that two of Eliot’s greatest poems—commonly perceived as being very different thematically—partake in the mystic literary tradition which is described in detail in Underhill’s text.

To be sure, it cannot be entirely clear precisely how Eliot made use of Underhill’s Mysticism, or which parts of the text interested him enough to become an important part of his beliefs about art and life. What is clear is that Eliot read Mysticism with great interest (he made extensive notes) and that many ideas in Mysticism bear a
striking resemblance to ideas that would become central in Eliot’s poetry and theory. In
fact, Underhill’s treatment of the characteristics of mysticism gives the reader of Eliot’s
poetry insight into a conception of art that illuminates a possible strategy for The Waste
Land and further suggests the prophetic nature of the poem.

In her description of the artist, Underhill attends to many of the concerns that
Eliot expressed throughout his artistic and critical works. For instance, she, like Eliot,
spends a great deal of time addressing the communicational problems that face the artist.
For Underhill, each person possesses latent mystical feeling. That feeling is the source of
art (70). In other words, art is the attempt to communicate mystical feeling and to express
an illumination to spiritual reality. Expressing such a reality, says Underhill, is terribly
difficult. Consequently, the majority of mystic and artistic expression is highly symbolic
and “veiled” so that the text can press its reader past superficial meaning and on to the
sense of illumination. In his 1921 essay “The Metaphysical Poets” Eliot essentially
reiterates this view of poetic expression, exploring the notion, present in Underhill, that
communication of complex ideas, such as those on spirituality, must be heavily “veiled”
in order to be effective. Eliot, writing this essay in the same year in which he wrote much
of The Waste Land, argues that the Metaphysical poets, who sought “to find the verbal
equivalents for states of mind and feeling” (Selected Prose 65), realized that the “ordinary
man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmented” (64). Accordingly they were
“constantly amalgamating disparate experience” in order to “form new wholes” (64).
This is fundamentally what Eliot was up to in The Waste Land: pulling the seeming
chaos of ordinary experience together under a new order. He had perceived this order in
his own intense moments of spiritual clarity, or of “mystic feeling,” and he was now trying to find verbal equivalents. Thus, reiterating Underhill’s argument, Eliot went on to decide in “Metaphysical Poets” that since “Our civilization comprehends great complexity and variety,” poets “must be difficult” and “must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning” (65, Eliot’s italics). I argue that Eliot comprehended modern civilization as a part of an overarching spiritual order or reality. The communication of this spiritual reality is what Eliot is up to in many of his major poems—specifically The Waste Land and Four Quartets—and the difficulty he met when trying to communicate such inherently incommunicable subject matter led him to follow the concept of art elucidated by Underhill and to take on intensely veiled forms of communication that might better express “mystic feeling.”

Underhill’s conceptions of the artist’s task might well show what Eliot conceived as his own task in The Waste Land. Underhill’s artist must bridge the gap between appearance and reality. Along these lines, Underhill explains the inherent shortcomings of realistic art: “we know that the picture which is ‘like a photograph,’ […] the novel which is a perfect transcript of life, fail to satisfy us” (74). This is so, argues Underhill, because the true goal of art is “not to reproduce the illusions of ordinary men but to catch and translate for us something of that ‘secret plan,’ that reality which the artistic consciousness, in a measure, is able to perceive” (74). So the artist, like the true mystic, possesses a deeper level of perception. Deeper perception, says Underhill, “brings with it the imperative longing for expression” (76). The artist, then, has the responsibility to
communicate his vision; however, the vision is inherently difficult to describe. Underhill carefully and thoroughly details this difficulty in terms that Eliot—a man nearly always concerned with the complicated nature of effective communication—would be sure to sympathize with:

Only those who have tried, know how small a fraction of his [sic] vision he can, in the most favorable of circumstance, contrive to represent. [. . .]

First, there is the huge disparity between his unspeakable experience and the language which will most nearly suggest it. Next, there is the great gulf fixed between his mind and the mind of the world. His audience must be bewitched as well as addressed, caught up to something of his state, before they can be made to understand. (italics mine 76)

Eliot wrote often of his inability to express what he meant, and if any modern poet knew what it was to struggle with the futility of addressing his audience on the deepest levels of their sensibility, Eliot did. Over and again in his other works Eliot articulates exasperation with attempting, and failing, to communicate in this way to his audience.

This is the failure that Prufrock, Eliot’s would-be prophet, foresees. The “overwhelming question” that all of his experience, useful or not, drops on his plate is certainly not a simple thing to relate to the sophisticateds that surround him. Trying to decide if he should squeeze the universe into a ball—in other words, if he should “catch and translate for us something of that ‘secret plan’” (Underhill 74)—Prufrock can only wallow indecisively in the mire of the ineffable:

And should I then presume?
And how should I begin?

. . . . .

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt sleeves leaning out of windows? . . .

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas. (68-74)

But Prufrock is no prophet, and rather than risk a misunderstanding, he denies the imperative longing for expression, and decides that his life would be just as well spent as a mute scavenger of the sea. Frankly, he doubts that any attempt he would make to show his condensed view of the universe would be “worth it.” Eliot’s Prufrock, like so many poets, prophets, and mystics before him, knows that his interpretation of the scraps of his experience cannot be easily stepped into by others, and he blurts out his frustration: “It is impossible to say just what I mean!” (104).

Concerned that he would not be able to overcome the seeming impossibility of effective expression, Eliot had doubts that he would ever write anything worthwhile after “Prufrock” (Gordon). He knew that in order to reach the inhabitants of the modern world, who were largely unconscious of the reality he wished to present, his poetry would have to bewitch them. It would have to catch them up in his specific state of mind before they would be able to understand that there was much more to reality than the ever-failing,
instable material existence. In Underhill’s Mysticism, he would have found a very insightful expression of religious and artistic attempts to do just that.

Underhill’s privileging of musical expression, in particular, would have resonated with what Eliot knew about music’s power to far exceed the effectiveness of the written word. That mystics often describe the feeling of illumination as being essentially musical confirms Underhill’s suggestion that music is better suited to express transcendent ideas, as it communicates a sense that words cannot. Richard Rolle, “the father of English Mysticism,” explains the nature of the disparity between words and song: “Worldly lovers smoothly words or ditties of our song may know, for the words they read: but the tone and sweetness of that song they may not learn” (78). A poet of Eliot’s sensibility no doubt would have delighted in Underhill’s passages describing the communicative possibilities of music:

Were he a musician, it is probable that the mystic could give his message to other musicians in terms of that art, far more accurately than language will allow him to do [. . .]. These [words] correspond so well to the physical plane and its adventures, that we forget that they have but the faintest of relations with transcendental things. Even the artist, before he can make use of them, is bound to re-arrange them in accordance with the laws of rhythm: obeying unconsciously the rule by which all arts ‘tend to approach the condition of music.’” (76).

Underhill further argues that mystic writing, if it is to be successfully expressive, must take advantage of the “close connection between rhythm and heightened states of
consciousness” (79). Perhaps such a conception of the necessity of rhythm underlies, at least partially, Eliot’s most famous statement about *The Waste Land*: “it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling” (*Norton Anthology* 474). Eliot would have been aware of the potential that rhythm has for allowing language to transcend superficial meaning. He is quoted as having said that he “wasn’t even bothering whether [he] understood what [he] was saying” when he wrote *The Waste Land* (473). Is it possible that Eliot focused so much on rhythm rather than the logical continuity of language in order to carve out an original space for himself in the long line of highly “veiled” mystical literature?

Eliot would later write an explanation of the use of music in poetry that is very similar to Underhill’s in *Mysticism*, which he had read even before writing “Prufrock.” Several passages within his 1942 essay, “The Music of Poetry,” bear remarkable similarity to Underhill’s suggestions that music enhances the meaning of poetry, while simultaneously seeming to offer an apology for the type of poetic form first experimented with at length by Eliot in *The Waste Land*. For instance, Eliot remarks in his essay that William Morris’s *Blue Closet* “is a delightful poem, though I cannot explain what it means, and I doubt whether the author could have explained it. It has an effect somewhat like that of a rune or a charm, but runes and charms are very practical formulae designed to produce definite results, such as getting a cow out of a bog” (*Selected Prose* 110). The same comment—though perhaps omitting the word “delightful”—could rightfully be made about *The Waste Land*, with its rhythmic counterpoint, multiple voices, and charm or dream-like effect. Eliot goes on to echo Underhill in his remarks about the music of poetry, saying that
it is a commonplace to observe that the meaning of a poem may wholly escape paraphrase [. . .]; but if we are told that the poem is gibberish and has no meaning, we shall consider that we have been deluded—this was no poem, it was merely an imitation of instrumental music. If, as we are aware, only a part of the meaning can be conveyed by paraphrase, that is because the poet is occupied with frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist. (111)

For Eliot, it is in dealing with the frontiers of consciousness that music is most useful. Here, Eliot echoes his earlier statement in the same essay that the music of poetry cannot exist apart from its meaning and that he has never seen musically beautiful poetry that made no sense. This thought, along with Eliot’s comment that unparaphrasable poetry “is occupied with frontiers of consciousness,” suggests that Eliot knew precisely what he was saying when he called his most famous poem “rhythmic grumbling” and said that he was not bothering with whether he knew what he meant while he was writing it. He was not indicating that there was no meaning; rather he was saying that the meaning could not be approached by paraphrasing it; it could not be approached with non-musical words. This is because Eliot’s poem, like much literature dealing with mystic feeling before it, is primarily “occupied with frontiers of consciousness, beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist.” Accordingly, “the ambiguities may be due to the fact that the poem means more, not less, than ordinary speech can communicate” (111). Therefore, difficulty in paraphrasing meaning in The Waste Land and the musical qualities of the poem suggest that the poem’s primary subject matter exists on, or past, the edge of
normal consciousness, quite possibly in the realm of consciousness that seeks unity with spiritual reality.

Instances from The Waste Land demonstrate that the poem deals with an inherently indescribable spiritual reality. For one thing, the speaker in “The Burial of the Dead,” accuses the ordinary man of being unable to see this underlying spiritual reality, saying that he “know[s] only a heap of broken images” (21-22). The implication in the following lines where the speaker says he “will show you something different” is that he has, indeed, gained insight into the reality that justifies the heap of broken images. This is why the speaker goes on to record a vision of silence he has had in the hyacinth garden. Here, he describes the “heart of light, [or] the silence,” saying that he “could not speak” and his “eyes failed” (38-41). The import of this spiritual vision, the essence of which Eliot describes by borrowing Dante’s “heart of light” from Paradiso, is not easily paraphrased, and the poem will have to be difficult in order to approach an equivalent for the state of mind described here. That the meaning of The Waste Land lies primarily in the indescribable realm of spirituality also explains the note to the conclusion of the poem. Eliot glosses Shantih, a barely translatable word itself, as “the Peace which passeth understanding” (Norton Anthology 487). The spiritual vision of perfect peace that closes the poem cannot be adequately described.

Another question concerning The Waste Land, which also finds its answer in Eliot’s relation to the tradition of mystic literature, must be addressed: If The Waste Land is essentially a prophetic poem about the awakening and illumination of the spiritual consciousness, why is the poem so predominantly dark? Simply put, the answer seems to
be that Eliot feels that spiritual awakening is impossible without the knowledge of slumber; likewise, illumination cannot be reached without the realization of being in the dark. As I have mentioned before in this study, Eliot thought himself particularly aware of the “reality of sin,” and he thought of the cultivation of this awareness, in and of itself, as a triumph in the development of the consciousness. In Underhill, Eliot would have encountered many saints and mystics who held to precisely this view of the reality of sin and who valued the development of this view as a necessary step in the awakening and evolution of the spiritual consciousness. For example, one can begin to understand the view of reality that Eliot wanted to impart in terms of two phenomena that Underhill depicts in Mysticism: the “theory of emanations,” which Underhill explains and traces through the mystic tradition, and the “Mystic Way” or path of development of the spiritual consciousness.

First of all, the theory of emanations proposes that God, or the Absolute, is the center of all and is utterly transcendent: “The Absolute Godhead is conceived as removed by a vast distance from the material world of sense; [. . .] Only by its ‘emanations’ or manifested attributes can we attain knowledge of it. By the outflow of these manifested attributes and powers the created universe exists” (Underhill 97). At first glance this theory may seem to bear little relation to The Waste Land. However, Underhill’s further explanation shows that aspects of this view of the universe, similar to the Neoplatonic view, have clear resemblance to the view that many readers of The Waste Land, including myself, have been unable to miss:
Such a way of conceiving of Reality [that of the theory of emanations] accords with the type of mind which William James called the “sick soul.” [. . .] It comes naturally to the temperament which leans to pessimism, which sees a “great gulf fixed” between itself and its desire, and is above all things sensitive to the elements of evil and imperfection in its own character and in the normal experience of man. Permitting these elements to dominate its field of consciousness, wholly ignoring the divine aspect of the World of Becoming, such a temperament constructs [. . .] the concept of a material world and a normal self which are very far from God. (99)

Thus, the speaker of “the Burial of the Dead” calls London an “Unreal City” and accuses its population of being a group of lost souls wandering in limbo (WL, 60). Eliot knew that anyone concerned with the awakening of the spiritual consciousness must cultivate sensitivity to the elements of imperfection in the material world. Awareness of the distance between two worlds, the spiritual and the material, engenders the desire to close the gap. Thus, says Underhill, the symbol that suggests the most to those who hold this world view is the pilgrimage: “Those who conceive the Perfect as a beatific vision exterior to them and very far off, [. . .] will feel the process of their entrance into reality to be quest, an arduous journey from the material to the spiritual world” (128). In its extended references to the grail quest and to Dante’s Commedia, The Waste Land would seem to be describing the beginning of such an arduous journey.

Indeed, another look at Underhill’s text reveals that the sixth chapter of her book, “Mysticism and Symbolism,” may have even given Eliot some of the initial inspiration
for including references to the grail quest and to the *Inferno*. “The pilgrimage idea,” notes Underhill, “appears in mystical literature under two different aspects: One is the search for the ‘Hidden Treasure which desires to be found.’ Such is the ‘quest of the Grail’ [. . .]. The other is the long, hard journey towards a known and definite goal or state. Such are Dante’s ‘Divine Comedy’ and Bunyan’s ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’” (129).

Certainly, the presence of these two types of pilgrimage—seen in allusions to Dante in the fourth stanza of “The Burial of the Dead” and in the fourth stanza of “The Fire Sermon,” and seen in references to the Grail quest in “What the thunder Said”—is one of the most telling uses of symbolism for many readers of Eliot. Not only does it indicate, as Underhill’s sixth chapter suggests, that Eliot was concerned with highlighting and subsequently closing the grave distance between the human and the divine, but the presence of the pilgrimage also implies that it must begin in a very dark and unconscious place. However, before looking closely at the text of the poem, it will be helpful to see just how important developing the sense of darkness—or distance from the Absolute—is in the Mystic tradition.

Few disagree that Eliot devotes the bulk of *The Waste Land* to a portrayal of death, decay and infertility. For instance, the passages that gain power and significance from references to Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* and Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* depict an infertile land in desperate need of freeing waters for its restoration. Along the same lines, Eliot’s depictions of sex, rather than showing any possibility for procreation, only highlight his perception the inherent infertility of ordinary secular life and demonstrate the futility of perverted affection. Accordingly, the conversation about
abortion that concludes “A Game of Chess” is fitting. Lil has taken pills to abort her growing fetus and to make herself barren so that her husband, who “wants a good time” (WL 148), can have sex without the worry of its regenerative capabilities. The pills have also rotted out her teeth. The scene is a horrifying depiction of the modern person’s descent into spiritual infertility and decay.

Generally, analyses of the poem agree with the above assertions concerning themes in The Waste Land. However, Eliot has been described here as a prophet following the tradition of mysticism in order to provide a reading which accounts for both the “wasteland” and “non-wasteland” aspects of the poem, the aspects that discourage as well as those that encourage. As other critics have sufficiently proven the success of Eliot’s depiction of conditions of the wasteland itself, analyzing the scenes which are given over to this purpose would be mere reiteration. For the purposes of this argument, it will suffice to say that all passages not dealt with directly herein serve to fulfill the prophetic role of elucidating a decaying condition, a role which, again, has been proven, even if not in the same terms, by a number of other critics (specifically Dilworth’s analysis of the role of Tiresias, the perilous chapel, and sex within The Waste Land). However, in addition to proving that The Waste Land presents a dark view of modern, material existence, it can be shown by examining Underhill’s Mysticism that Eliot had a definite, positive goal in mind for offering such a view.

Underhill describes the process, in which the mind oscillates between periods of darkness and illumination, in part two of her book, “The Mystic Way.” Although Underhill divides and numbers five steps of the process (1. Awakening 2. Purgation 3.
Illumination 4. Dark Night of the Soul 5. Union), she is quick to point out that each person may not be involved in all of the steps and that the steps can come in any order: “We seem at first to be confronted by a group of selves which arrive at the same end without obeying any general law” (168). In general though, one developing along the mystic way must first awaken to consciousness of divine reality. Based on what Lyndall Gordon has recorded about Eliot’s early experiences with “Silence” directly after his graduation from Harvard and his searching in the lives of the Saints and mystics, it is not a stretch to say that Eliot had opened his mind to consciousness of divine reality. I do not mean to imply that Eliot ever became or even desired to become a true mystic in the fullest sense of the term; I do know, however, that, from early in his career, Eliot remained acutely aware of the mystic feeling to which Underhill argues that all men are prone, especially those of artistic, philosophical, or visionary sensibility.

In the mystic tradition, the initial sense of mystic feeling and of the awareness of the divine reality brings with it a very disturbing realization: spiritual reality, in all its perfect serenity, bears very little resemblance to the distracted, material world of flux and death. Eliot wrote The Waste Land in order to deal with precisely this realization. According to Underhill, “the Self, aware for the first time of divine beauty, realizes by contrast its own finiteness and imperfection, the manifold illusions in which it is immersed, [. . .]. Its attempts to eliminate by discipline and mortification all that stands in the way of its progress towards union with God constitute Purgation: a state of pain and effort” (169). Purgation is just one of the “negative” stages in the “Mystic Way,” and the stages often come in any order and have also been combined in many examples from the
lives of saints and mystics. Thus, the seemingly negative elements of the process that accompany the stage of purgation and of the Dark Night of the Soul can be present at any one time in the life of the artist who has experienced mystic feeling. According to Underhill, the path will be “intermittently accompanied” by the Dark Night of the Soul, the most terrible of all experiences of the Mystic Way. This “stage,” like that of Purgation, is characterized by an “intense sense of Divine Absence” (170). In the Dark Night, says Underhill, “the human instinct for personal happiness must be killed. This is the ‘spiritual crucifixion’ so often described by the mystics: [. . .]. The Self now surrenders itself, its individuality, and its will completely. It desires nothing, asks nothing, is utterly passive, and is thus prepared for union” (170). Dealing with these two necessarily dark steps of the progress towards developing the spiritual consciousness is to a large extent the goal of The Waste Land.

The reason for identifying the above passages in Underhill’s Mysticism is to suggest that, for Eliot, presentations of darkness, futility, death, perverted lust, blindness, etc. in The Waste Land are a necessary product of his vision of and openness to an absolute spiritual reality. Similarly, Eliot knew that these “dark” elements must be confronted and overcome so that the self would be able to move from being immersed in illusion to being unified with spiritual reality. Having himself received hints of this reality, Eliot became more and more aware of the disparity between it and modern existence. Thus, along with the urge he had to communicate his vision into the absolute, Eliot also felt the doubts and pessimism that accompany the Dark Night and the urge—
dealt with repeatedly in his earlier Saint poems—to purge himself of the manifold illusions which made up the physical and fallen world.

In Underhill’s view of the development of the spiritual consciousness, the dark aspects of identifying and purging sin and of feeling divine absence are absolutely necessary in order to attain spiritually fruitful results. In other, more symbolic, words, death necessarily precedes resurrection. The tradition of mystic literature overwhelmingly conveys this necessity. Indeed some saints and mystics, conscious of the fact that intense periods of hardship and doubt would accompany the cultivation of their spiritual consciousness, remained intuitively optimistic in the growth that could come out of the Dark Night. For instance, the German mystic Henry Suso, whose writing Underhill cites extensively, confidently declared that the Dark Night of the Soul, with all its sense of futility, doubt, and divine absence, is a constructive period. “The self,” says Suso in *Mysticism*, “loses and leaves behind certain elements of its world, long loved but now outgrown: as children must make the hard transition from nursery to school. Destruction and construction here go together: [. . .] the feeling of deprivation and inadequacy which comes from the loss of consciousness is an indirect stimulus to new growth” (386).

Others have made similar comments concerning the idea that the material consciousness must be lost in order for the spiritual to be found. St. John of the Cross, a mystic to whom Eliot alluded extensively in *Four Quartets*, is quoted in *Mysticism* as having proposed the necessity of *ennui* for spiritual growth. Underhill clearly describes John of the Cross’s view of *ennui*: “Often combined with the sense of sin and the ‘absence of God’ is another negation, [. . .] the dismal condition of spiritual *ennui* which ascetic writers know so well
under the name of ‘aridity,’ and which psychologists describe as the result of emotional
fatigue. [. . .] Yet the mystics are unanimous in declaring that this is a necessary stage in
the growth of the spiritual consciousness” (391). Here is the truth upon which “all the
great experts of the spiritual life agree—whatever their creeds, their symbols, their
explanations”: “No transmutation without fire, say the alchemists: No cross, no crown,
says the Christian. [. . .] It is the entombment which precedes the resurrection” (401-2). It
is this death-resurrection cycle, which Eliot surveyed early in his career in Underhill’s
work, which underscores the prophetic theme of The Waste Land.

One critical perspective lends weight to the argument that Eliot had a death-and-
resurrection journey like that of the Mystic Way in mind when he composed The Waste
Land. His view should be addressed before moving on into an analysis of passages that
elucidate the means of restoration in The Waste Land. In agreement with much criticism
on The Waste Land, Philip R. Headings argues that restoration can be seen in the poem
only on an implied basis. Significant to my argument is the fact that Headings singles out
that hope in The Waste Land lies implicit in the unrecorded positive aspects of “death-
and-resurrection sequence[s].” Each sequence, therefore, implies restoration by referring
us to, for instance, Tristan’s eventual healing, the eventual resurrection of Christ, Dante’s
eventual ascent into paradise, and the eventual “liberation from lust of Arnaut Daniel’s
purgation by fire, of Buddha's ‘Fire Sermon,’ of St. Augustine’s Confessions, and of the
‘Thunder Sermon’ from which Eliot takes the three commands Give, Sympathize, and
Control.” While I feel that The Waste Land does more than imply “positive potentialities
growing out of the initial waste and barren condition” of his poem, Headings argument does offer a helpful illustration of the essentially mystic progression from death to resurrection that controls *The Waste Land*.

Indeed, it is clear that Eliot would have consciously realized that St. Augustine and Dante were both writers in the mystic tradition. Accordingly, their inclusion in *The Waste Land* explicitly links the poem with particular versions of the mystic way and highlights the central aim of traversing the barren landscape: the rebirth to spiritual reality. Headings, citing Philo M. Buck, accurately summarizes the implications that the inclusion of Dante have for *The Waste Land* as a whole. Buck, in arguing for the relevance of Eliot’s allusions to Dante, notes the “that the purpose of Dante's *Inferno* is to make unregenerate humanity see, ‘with no veil to obscure, the ugliness of sin [ . . . ] not that he may recoil at its horror and stand in judgement . . . but that he may suffer in mind and body the moral illness that is necessary before the discipline of Purgatory can be begun” (all citation italics mine). Clearly, Eliot’s inclusion of Dante demonstrates that *The Waste Land* has in mind a progression to spiritual consciousness like that of the Mystic Way. Headings goes on to suggest that evoking moral illness is the essential purpose of *The Waste Land*. Consequently, Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, which Eliot recognized as a text of Christian mysticism because of its depiction of the journey through *hell and purgatory*, is illuminating the same need for spiritual insight that is present in *The Waste Land*.

I cannot agree, however, that restoration is only implied in *The Waste Land*. Analyses such as Headings and Dilworth’s tend to ignore or gloss over explicit
statements of hope, insisting that, if hope for the restoration of Eliot’s wasteland does exist, it remains implicit as a mere potentiality. However, restoration is not so indistinct in Eliot’s poem. In fact, the more commonly-overlooked passages of *The Waste Land*, those drawing on conventional forms of spirituality such as orthodox Christianity and Hinduism, explicitly reveal the means of restoration. Eliot, by giving the passages that deal directly with Christ and the Upanishads sole rights to hope, assumes the prophetic role of alerting his contemporaries to their wasted spiritual condition and subsequently offering a means of restoration with potent spirituality. Essentially, Eliot’s *The Waste Land* draws attention to a dead spiritual condition in order to illicit a return to specific forms of spirituality that Eliot perceived as profitable.

Certain aspects of Eliot’s life in the years leading directly to his writing of *The Waste Land* may explain the relative paucity of the poem’s focus on restoration and thus, help to show why such a focus is so commonly overlooked in readings of *The Waste Land*. The first such aspect was that although Eliot showed signs of an ever-increasing belief in Christianity, he remained hesitant to dedicate himself wholly to one faith. Lyndall Gordon notes that a “period of intellectual stress [starting in 1911 and following] . . . came from a latent prophetic power Eliot could not quite grasp or express” (65). Gordon notes further that Eliot possessed an “overwhelming need to question a drably abhorrent world based on attrition, but did not know in what direction to carry his questions or what exactly to do” (65). This fact may partially explain the endorsement of both eastern and western forms of asceticism in *The Waste Land*. Eliot seems to have regarded the fact that ascetic principles are present in Christianity, Buddhism, and
Hinduism as indicative of a central truth which necessitated that the spiritual consciousness be cultivated through humility and poverty. Thus, he was never willing to restrict his religious references solely to one form of worship, even after his formal conversion to the Anglican Church. However, within the period leading up to 1922 Eliot continued to inch further and further toward a definite, personal faith, and in his poetry, specifically “the ‘2nd Debate between the Body and Soul’ and ‘The Little Passion’, “ one can notice “Eliot’s mind edging beyond ‘Silence’ and ‘The First Debate’ towards a religious, even Christian, point of view” (61). Eliot would not “officially” convert for another decade.

The secularizing influence of Eliot’s editor, Ezra Pound, presents a second aspect which may account for the decided favoring of the prophetic role of pointing out moral abuses in *The Waste Land*. In the years leading up to *The Waste Land*, Pound convinced Eliot to put down religious topics like those in “I am the Resurrection” in order to focus on social satire, the which Pound perceived in “Prufrock.” Acquiescing to Pound’s already proven editing suggestions, Eliot “fell into the habit of writing jibes at creatures [Sweeney, Mrs. Porter’s whores, etc.] so patently futile as hardly to warrant the energy of his attack” (Gordon 104). Pound’s influence is perhaps nowhere greater in Eliot’s career than in his editing of *The Waste Land*. Two editorial choices in particular illustrate Pound’s secularizing influence. First, Pound omitted the statement, “(I John saw these things and heard them)” between lines fifty-six and fifty-seven of the final version (Valerie Eliot 9). Perhaps Pound thought the line too forced an attempt on Eliot’s part to once again posit the speaker’s prophetic authority, preferring nuance to force and
ambiguity to answers. Left in, the line would refer the reader to the Apostle John’s words about his divine revelation while in exile on the Island of Patmos. Having just been reassured of the quick return of Christ and of the eventual delights of a spiritually fruitful Jerusalem (the home from which he is exiled), John provides his eyewitness testimony of the Divine solution to his exile: “And I John saw these things and heard them.” The words stand out as an affirmation of hope placed in reconciliation with the Divine, and had they been left in the poem, would have deepened the poem’s prophetic voice.

Another editorial choice by Pound essentially hides the prophetic call to develop the spiritual consciousness by deserting the material world of flux. In Eliot’s original manuscript of “The Fire Sermon,” Pound cut a very telling passage that would have come between lines 214 and 215, transitioning from the lines concerning Mr. Eugenides to Tiresias’s description of modern sex. The passage, speaking in regards to seers that inhabit the Unreal City, looks forward to the language of Four Quartets and refers directly to an ideal spiritual reality to which London is unconscious:

Some brains, unbalanced from the natural equipoise
(London! your population/people is bound upon the wheel!)
Record the movements of these huddled toys
And trace the painful, ideal meaning which they spell
Doubtfully into these vague perceptions
Within this penumbral consciousness.

Fulfilling a prophetic role, these lines implicate Londoners who are “bound upon the wheel” of fortune, hoping to make them realize that they only “live in the awareness of
the observing eye.” This manuscript version in particular seems to be reaching, if only with words, through the dark night of the soul into an unsteady illumination.

Although Eliot obviously gives Pound the social satire he asks for by including observations of the human decay that surrounded him in 1918 London, these observations assert themselves simply as evidence of Eliot’s belief in man’s “distance from an unknowable deity” (Gordon 20). The poem marks a return not only to the realm of social satire but more importantly to the topic of the relationship of man with the Absolute, a subject to which Eliot gave great consideration and a subject which merited considerably more complex artistry than that of poems like “Sweeney.” Indeed, a close examination of the text proves that it advocates particular practices which will bring about restoration.

* * *

An analysis of The Waste Land’s calls to spiritual illumination

The most significant stories to which Eliot alludes in creating The Waste Land contain the discouraging and the hopeful, the wasted and the fertile. But as each of these instances occurs in Eliot’s poem, explicit references to the means of restoration occur only in three specific situations. It is true that in the early myths of the Fisher King, the hero was capable of bringing fertility back to the land by posing the right questions. In addition, the Bikkhus who listened to the Buddha’s tale of a people rife with “lust, with the fire of anger, with the fire of ignorance . . . with (the anxieties of) birth, decay, death, grief, lamentation, suffering, dejection, and despair” need only detach themselves from
their desire in order to be “made free” and “realize that rebirth is exhausted” (The Sacred
Book of the East qtd. in Dilworth). However, the fact remains that Eliot’s excision of the
elements of hope in each case mandates that the reader view only that which might
discourage, that which might evoke in him or her the moral illness of ennui which is a
necessary step in the development of the spiritual consciousness. But Eliot, in providing
“awareness of positive potentialities” in The Waste Land, goes beyond simply implying
that awareness (Headings np). In his treatment of Christian and Hindu cycles of death and
rebirth specifically, Eliot explicitly points the reader to the means of restoration.

At the onset of his poem, Eliot asserts that “April is the cruelest month,” and in so
doing, he concedes the difficulty of the process of restoration (line 1). According to Eliot,
in order for his prophetic poem to be a success, the reading of The Waste Land must be a
similarly difficult process. Like so many of the saints, mystics, and visionary artists that
have come before him, Eliot understands that certain hardships must precede any
awakening to spiritual consciousness. One must realize that the material world of flux
exists at a vast distance from the divine world of spirit and that physical existence is rife
with sin, death, and doubt. Without realizing the need for growth, the inhabitants of The
Waste Land will remain spiritually blind and will peter out a meaningless existence
governed by fortune and the illusory world of sensual perception. Consequently, The
Waste Land, as prophetic attempt at restoration, must drag the reader from the “warm”
ignorance of his “winter” by evoking in him an actualization of his wasted condition and
pointing him to the path of freedom, a process likened in the poem to nature’s equally
miraculous restoration: “breeding/ Lilacs out of the dead land” and “stirring dull roots
with spring rain” (WL 1-4). So, as a sort of preface, the opening stanza of The Waste Land offers an analogy for the entire process of restoration, moving from death in winter to awakening in spring and then to full life in summer.

The transition to the second stanza drops the reader into the middle of the wasteland. Here, Eliot introduces his prophetic task. Eliot, himself, acknowledges a specific prophetic example in his note to the second stanza, pointing readers to Ezekiel. Passages within the book of Ezekiel shed light not only on Eliot’s statement of prophetic purpose in stanza two but also on his explicit references to Christ as a means of restoration. One passage in particular, communicated as if directly from the God of Israel, provides a statement of Ezekiel’s purpose: “that I might make them desolate, to the end that they might know that I am the Lord” (Ryrie Study Bible, Ezekiel 20:26). A similar purpose can be attributed to Eliot’s poem: that he might make them desolate, to the end that they might know the means of their spiritual restoration. Also, Ezekiel’s description of the Messiah as a cutting from a dead tree that will “bring forth boughs, and bear fruit, and be a goodly cedar . . . in the shadow of which” all birds will rest, offers not only a solution for restoration that is congruent with Eliot’s, as seen in the reference to the “red rock” in lines twenty-five and six, but also illuminates Eliot’s reference to “the dead tree” which “gives no shelter” in line twenty-three (Ezekiel 17:22-24).

The reader should note the shift in language in stanza two from a modern and conversational tone to the grand rhetoric of Old Testament prophecy, as communicated in the Elizabethan English of the King James Bible. This shifting of language to a high, imperative, almost ritualistic tone is common among passages in The Waste Land in
which the deepest prophetic voices are speaking. This is the tone that accuses the reader throughout, calling the city unreal, saying that the “river’s tent is broken” (173). It is the tone of passages cut by Pound in which John of Patmos says, “I John saw all these things,” and in which the speaker declares that London’s population is “bound on the wheel” of fortune (Valerie Eliot 9, 30). It is the tone that Eliot gives to Tiresias in a similar line: “I Tiresias [. . .] / perceived the scene and foretold the rest—” (229). A similar tone concludes “What the Thunder Said.” Eliot uses each of these instances, in which a seer explicitly reveals that he has a truth to convey, to emphasize the objective nature of his overall subject and to demonstrate his appeal for us to consider the real, but almost indescribable, spiritual realm. Clearly, it is significant that the most persistent voice throughout the poem is that of the prophet pointing us away from an illusory world of flux and to the profits of a consciousness awakened to spiritual reality.

In lines eighteen through thirty of “The Burial of the Dead,” the speaker takes on this prophetic tone for the first time, putting on the voice of authority, the voice of one whose message comes straight from an ultimate source. His question pierces directly to the heart of the inhabitants of the wasteland: “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow/ Out of this stony rubbish?” (WL, 18-19). A stark parallel emerges between Eliot’s speaker and “the word of the Lord” as he speaks to his prophet in Ezekiel 22:2: “Now, thou son of man, wilt thou judge, wilt thou judge the bloody city? yea, thou shalt show her all her abominations” (Ryrie Study Bible). Eliot’s speaker, as prophet, takes the posture of one with knowledge to impart, of one giving divine revelation. He accuses: “Son of man, / You cannot say, or guess” (WL, 20-1). Here, the prophet peruses
the nation and finds them unable to discern the peril of their condition. In a land where “the sun beats,” “the tree gives no shelter,” and “the dry stone no sound of water” (water particularly significant here as the substance of divine grace later attributed in the NT to the Spirit of God), the people “know only/ A heap of broken images” (21-4). Evelyn Underhill, explaining the characteristics of the Dark Night, offers a parallel description in which the soul must undergo uncertainty in order to achieve resurrection: “She [the Soul] burns with a consuming thirst which cannot be borne, but one which nothing will quench: nor would she have it quenched with any other water than that of Which our Lord spoke to the Samaritan woman; and this water is denied her” (395). Much of the rest of The Waste Land will be given over to the task of depicting this dry and thirsty “heap of broken images,” but first comes an explicit plea to acknowledge a means of restoration (22).

In the case of the tree and the red rock (correctly linked by the editors of The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry to Isaiah 32:2’s description of Messiah as “the shadow of a great rock in a weary land”), restoration is found in Christ. There is, however, one immensely important difference between the reference in line 23 to the “dead tree” and the reference in lines twenty-five and six to the “red rock.” As opposed to the reference regarding the “dead tree,” Eliot’s allusion to the “shadow under [the] red rock” and the subsequent call to “Come in under the shadow of this red rock” stand out as one of the few explicit proclamations of truth and certain restoration in The Waste Land (25-6). The speaker states directly that there is “shelter under this red rock” and tells his audience to “come in under the shadow” of the rock (25-6). In this rare
moment, Eliot most resembles the confident prophet of God in the Old Testament standing amidst a wayward and idolatrous people and stating, “Thus, saith the Lord.” Here, in a poem which critics commonly call an argument for relativism and often link to the “avant-garde paganism” of Eliot’s contemporaries, is a statement pointing the reader specifically to Christ for shelter (Smith).

In the next four lines (27-30), Eliot continues to describe his prophetic purpose while strengthening the Christian imagery. Taking on a strategy strikingly similar to that attributed to Christ himself in The Gospel of John, Chapter Four, the speaker explains that he “will show [the reader] something different” from the shadow of himself, which is particularly futile in relation to the shadow of the red rock. Just as Christ offered to give the Samaritan woman a different kind of water than she herself could acquire, a “well of water springing up into everlasting life,” so the speaker of The Waste Land offers up a more satisfying means of restoration than can be found in the reader himself: “I will show you fear in a handful of dust” (John 4.14; WL, 30). By proposing to show the reader the horror of his wasted condition, this statement connects Eliot’s purpose directly to the tradition of Mystic literature as described in Underhill’s Mysticism. The line introduces Eliot’s attempt to reconcile an adulterous and exiled people to profitable forms of spirituality by making them feel the desolation of their spiritual condition. In order to affect change, he will show them the waste they have become.

The next explicit statement of a profitable means of restoration comes at the close of “The Fire Sermon” and again refers to Christ. That Eliot pays special attention to the explicit statements of hope in The Waste Land is particularly clear in this instance. Here,
the context is that of a speaker burning in the wasteland of lust. In the actual Fire Sermon, the Buddhist text from which Eliot borrows the name of this section of The Waste Land, the context is that of Buddha speaking to the Bhikkhus about their terrible condition and the means by which they can obtain freedom. As mentioned above, the problems of the Bhikkhus echo those of the inhabitants of The Waste Land: lust, anger, ignorance, and “(the anxieties of) birth, decay, death, grief, lamentation, suffering, dejection, and despair” (Sacred Book qtd. in Headings). Resolution to the burning waste found in the Fire Sermon comes from the detachment of those in the congregation (the Bhikkhus) from their desire. This alone would offer a properly mystical solution—that of purgation—to the problems of The Waste Land. Thus, the endorsement of asceticism in both eastern and western religion depicts no contradiction. Both texts, one Buddhist and one Christian, point to the same truth of humility and poverty. However, resolution in Eliot’s version of the Fire Sermon comes from means decidedly consistent with the tradition of Mystic Christianity. The speaker, “burning burning burning burning” in the flames of sexual desire, takes on the mindset of St. Augustine and confides in Christ for his purification: “O Lord Thou pluckest me out” (WL, 308-10). Effectively, the speaker gives up himself and his desire in order to be controlled by and unified with the absolute.

That Eliot not only asserts a means of freedom for his speaker but also changes that means of freedom from its original source so that it correlates more closely with his own beliefs is remarkably telling. Obviously, the poet is not willing to settle for vague implications of “an awareness of positive potentialities” in “The Fire Sermon” (Headings). If Eliot had been willing to rely on such vague implications, he no doubt
would have left the speaker burning in lust without explicit reference to an answer, assuming, as Headings supposes he has in other sections, that the reader is fully aware of the speaker’s potential for freeing himself by becoming detached from his desires. Eliot’s speaker, on the other hand, realizes his own inability to free himself and calls for help. In this way *The Waste Land* points explicitly to a specific means of restoration that is consistent with the death-and-resurrection cycles of the Mystic Way. The burning described here becomes the fire of purgation. It is not pleasant, but it must be resigned to, even embraced, because it causes suffering essential to unification with the divine.

The final, and perhaps most conclusive, fulfillment of the prophetic role of pointing to the means of restoration in *The Waste Land* appears in the closing section, “What the Thunder Said.” Actually, the means of restoration here is what the thunder said, but since the issue remains slightly more complex than this explanation implies, I will give further clarification. In section V of *The Waste Land*, Eliot creates a situation similar to that occurring in “The Fire Sermon.” In the first six stanzas of “What the Thunder Said,” Eliot sustains a lyrical beauty unparalleled throughout the rest of the poem. Here, he offers what is arguably his most vivid portrayal of the waste condition yet. But, as is the case in “The Fire Sermon,” Eliot chooses to undermine what would be the conventional means of restoration by replacing it with one of his own.

In the seventh stanza of “What the Thunder Said,” Eliot’s speaker comes upon the perilous chapel. The context that Eliot has in mind is the Grail Legend, as explained in Jessie L. Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance*. As Weston notes in her book, details of the Grail Legend can be quite diverse; however, in her attempt to “elucidate the perplexing
mystery of the Grail,” Weston “concentrate[s] on the persistent elements of the story” (22). In her treatment of one such element, the perilous chapel, Weston gives a summary of the various details which may appear in stories regarding the chapel: “sometimes there is a dead body laid on the altar; sometimes a Black Hand extinguishes the tapers; there are strange and threatening voices, and the general impression is that this is an adventure in which supernatural, and evil, forces are engaged” (165). Weston gives a more detailed description of several specific instances involving the hero’s approach to the chapel. Whatever the varying circumstances involved in these tales, in no case does the hero achieve his goal without entering the chapel, and in no case is the chapel empty. However, this is precisely the case in Eliot’s version of the tale.

Dilworth provides this helpful explanation of Eliot’s use of the perilous chapel in his critical essay, entitled “Eliot’s The Waste Land.” Dilworth argues that the chapel in The Waste Land is “reduced to a symbol of meaninglessness,” and he goes on to note that the chapel “is not even, as it is in Mallory, a place of terror to test the courage of a Lancelot” (np). So, in this case, Eliot chooses to include the perilous chapel, but he also chooses to destabilize the chapel as a means of restoration and to replace it with three Sanskrit words from the “Brihadaranyaka Upanishad”:  *datta, dayadhvam, damyata* (give, sympathize, control). Thus, the journey through The Waste Land does not end with retrieving the grail—a symbol of Christ’s sacrifice—rather, it explicitly draws out the implication of that sacrifice for humanity by calling us to sacrifice ourselves. This notion of self-sacrifice is central to Hindu and Christian Mysticism, and its presence further
demonstrates the explicit nature of The Waste Land’s call to develop the spiritual consciousness.

So having approached the perilous chapel, the speaker finds it bereft of meaning, but he is not long without an answer. Lightning flashes, announcing the coming of a storm which could bring rain, but before the freeing waters can be loosed upon the wasteland, the thunder must enjoin three virtues: Give, Sympathize, Control. The three virtues, reordered by Eliot, emphasize the poem’s prophetic task of offering a means by which to develop the spiritual consciousness. Bindu Mohanty, in “The ordering of the Sanskrit words in T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’,” argues that Eliot’s reordering of the virtues represents “an ascending order in the degree of giving” that can be read as “give, give yourself, give yourself up.” Clearly, the speaker here hands these virtues down “upon the characters of The Waste Land as means for transcendence and redemption” (Mohanty). Here, at the conclusion of The Waste Land, the speaker presents the essential goal that saints and mystics have always kept in mind during their respective Dark Nights of the Soul: “This is the ‘spiritual crucifixion’ so often described by the mystics: [. . .]. The self now surrenders itself, its individuality, and its will, completely” (170). As if confirming the conclusive nature of his prophetic advice, the speaker of The Waste Land ends with a second call to the reader to give, sympathize, and control followed by the repetition: “Shantih shantih shantih” (433-4). Shantih, a Sanskrit word that Eliot translates in his notes with the decidedly Christian phrasing, “the peace which passeth understanding,” leads the reader directly back to the means of restoration in The Waste Land’s first two prophetic calls to action. And so, the prophetic task of alerting an
audience to its blindness to spiritual reality, and thereby preparing that audience for the means by which it can achieve peace is complete. The reader, having experienced the wasteland and having been implicated as its source, is now prepared for union with the absolute through a development of the spiritual consciousness.

Clearly, *The Waste Land* comments on the awakening and development of the spiritual consciousness through a death to the self and its desires for the material world. However, it was not until writing the *Four Quartets* that Eliot fully fleshed out these ideas communicated by the death-and-resurrection pattern of *The Waste Land*. For this reason analyzing the *Quartets*—the task to which I devote my next chapter—offers the interested reader of *The Waste Land* an illuminating commentary on a theme central to both poems: the necessity of traversing the wasteland of material existence and rejecting its illusory suggestion of meaninglessness in order to obtain spiritual clarity. Such an analysis also demonstrates the fundamental continuity between these two poems, which critics often interpret as nearly antithetical. The fact that the message of the *Quartets* can be more easily paraphrased only highlights the poet’s privileging of a direct style of verse, in which Eliot continues to favor the musical analogy for poetry but redirects his focus to the meaning that follows from the feeling of meaninglessness. Moving from *The Waste Land* on to the text of the *Quartets*, demonstrates a definite progression in one journey to spiritual consciousness. As both texts confirm, acknowledging the seeming meaninglessness of existence constitutes the first step in accepting the ultimate significance of the spiritual.
CHAPTER THREE

“THERE IS NO END BUT ADDITION”: READING FOUR QUARTETS AFTER THE WASTE LAND

While it is true that the Quartets offer a more explicitly Christian outlook on the source of the spiritual world than The Waste Land, each of the two poems essentially describes the same way of cultivating the spiritual consciousness: giving up the self and its attachment to the ever-decaying world. Eliot clearly alludes to this form of asceticism—essentially an emphasis on the Catholic virtue of poverty of spirit which is necessary for progression in the Mystic Way—in both poems. Indeed, both cite Christian and Asian sources of asceticism. And since Eliot had publically converted to Anglo-Catholicism before he wrote the Quartets, the presence of non-Christian forms of spirituality need not put off critics who see similar meaning in both The Waste Land and Four Quartets. In other words, if “Eliot the intellectual skeptic” employed a “collocation of [. . .] two representatives of eastern and western asceticism” in The Waste Land (WL, 308-310), then the fact that “Eliot the devout Anglican” openly used a similar tactic in Four Quartets might signify a larger similarity in theme between the two poems and thus refute the notion that the person writing the poems had drastically changed his outlook.

Again, if one grants that The Waste Land takes part in a mystic literary tradition and essentially fulfills the prophetic task of awakening its readers to the ultimate significance of the spiritual world, then reading Four Quartets carefully will offer enormous insight into the mindset that underlies both poems. Starting with the two
epigraphs to “Burnt Norton” taken from Heraclitus and following to the unity of the fire and the rose that ends “Little Gidding,” the Four Quartets repeatedly proposes what The Waste Land implied: the emptiness of the normal, material existence must be dealt with by completely detaching the self from all that detracts from the development of the spiritual consciousness. Accordingly, Eliot opens the Quartets with two of Heraclitus’s propositions. In ‘Four Quartets’ Rehearsed, Raymond Preston quotes translations of both epigraphs. The first says that “The law of things is a law of Reason Universal, but most men live as though they had a wisdom of their own” (J. M. Mitchell qtd in Preston vii). I suggest that the first epigram summarizes a Christian mystic’s interpretation of the universe and explains the poem’s prophetic purpose. By commenting on the average person’s inability to comprehend the “Reason Universal”—the Reality that lies behind the seeming chaos—Eliot declares his intention to try to move through the chaos that leads us to rely merely on our own wisdom. Rather than depending on himself, the speaker of Four Quartets will come to accept his need for the Absolute through humility and poverty of spirit, just as the speaker of “The Fire Sermon” attempts to do by repeating his prayer: “O Lord Thou pluckest me out” (309).

The second epigraph says that “The way up and the way down is one and the same” (John Burnett qtd in Preston viii). This statement is a summary of the Heraclitian theory of time, which suggests that change and transience are the ultimate meanings of time. Here, I am inclined to agree with Morris Weitz’s argument in “T. S. Eliot: Time as a Mode of Salvation.” In defining Eliot’s notion of time, Weitz argues that Eliot uses the Heraclitean theory of time (“The way up is the way down, the way forward is the way
back”) as an epigraph to Four Quartets in order repudiate “its insistence upon the ultimate character of time as flux” (Bergonzi 139). Rather than insisting on a theory in which “the temporal is the ultimate reality,” says Weitz, Eliot posits his own Christian “immanence doctrine of time,” in which he argues that “within the flux the choice is always the same, either death or God; and that, if we deny God, Who is the Timeless, the Eternal, all experiences are worth nothing” (emphasis mine, 142). Further, “the Timeless is regarded as the creative source of the flux,” and “the flux . . . is taken as real but its reality is derived from and sustained by the more ultimate reality of the Eternal. The flux is not an illusion but it is an illusion to regard it as the only reality” (142). Weitz argues that this Christian immanence doctrine of time is “the fundamental idea” of Four Quartets (142). Allowing the validity of this argument, it would seem that both epigraphs point to the idea that awakening and developing the spiritual consciousness is the goal of the Four Quartets. Accordingly, the poem will repeatedly allude to the mystic goal of intuiting the spiritual meaning of the universe, just as The Waste Land did.

In the first stanza of “Burnt Norton,” the speaker ruminates on the nature of time and decides that “If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable” (BN I, 4-5). In doing so, Eliot offers a concession similar to the one he offered earlier in the first stanza of The Waste Land. Both openings confirm the fact that awakening to spiritual reality will be an extremely difficult process and may even seem cruel. For instance, the first stanza of the Quartets, by suggesting that “all time is eternally present,” suggests that time severely limits the reach of the human consciousness. The ideas people often entertain about “What might have been” are only “abstraction[s],” and they exist as “a
perpetual possibility / Only in a world of speculation” (6-8). Thus, speculation very often imposes itself upon human consciousness of reality, which can only exist in the present, with all of its limitations. All we can do is speculate on our memories, “but to what purpose?” (15).

The speaker offers one take on the answer to that question by rehearsing a particularly significant memory of himself in the rose garden behind Burnt Norton, a country house in the Cotswold Hills of Gloucestershire. Here, he has had what Evelyn Underhill would describe as a mystic feeling or a moment of spiritual clarity. As the speaker and his company neared a drained pool in the garden, he glimpsed the nature of a deeper reality:

   And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
   And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,
   The surface glittered out of heart of light,
   Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty. (BN I, 36-39)

The sensation described here seems remarkably like the experience of silence that Eliot had after his graduation from Harvard and the experience in the hyacinth garden in “The Burial of the Dead.” In fact, an exact phrase, taken from Dante’s Paradiso (Preston 28), occurs both in line 40 of “The Burial of the Dead” and in line 37 of “Burnt Norton,” thus uniting mystic feeling in the two poems under a common source: “the heart of light, the silence” (WL, 40). Therefore, each of the two poems can be said to describe the results, or the aftermath, of an experience of spiritual awakening.
Significantly, both of these episodes of insight into an underlying spiritual reality are cut off quickly, further suggesting the difficulty of cultivating spiritual consciousness in the constantly-fluctuating, temporal world. In “The Burial of the Dead” the passage ends abruptly at line 41 with a German phrase quoted from Tristan and Isolde: “Oed’ und leer das Meer” (“Desolate and empty is the sea”). The speaker, looking back on what could have been an enlightening insight, is essentially distracted, the questionable wisdom of Madame Sosostris stepping in as a representative of the limitations of an essentially temporal clairvoyance. Similarly, in “Burnt Norton” the speaker is looking back on the experience in memory. However, even though he too is distracted from his vision—this time by a bird in the garden—he is able to speculate on the import of the experience, which is summed up in one of the most quoted lines from the Quartets: “human kind / Cannot bear very much reality” (42-43). Essentially, this is the same message meant to be conveyed by the quick drop off in logical continuity after the hyacinth garden episode. Though the reality of the absolute, the “one end” toward which time past and time future point, is “always present,” it is not easily held onto. In fact, developing a sense of this reality requires a negation of the self and its attachment to the temporal. It is the necessity of this negation of the self which The Waste Land and the Four Quartets seek to communicate. In other words, Eliot reemphasizes the notion of purging the self of futile experience that was implied in The Waste Land by giving explicit contemplation of the via negativa in the rest of the Four Quartets.

Again, I stress that what I have previously treated as the restorative necessity of an exploration of futility in The Waste Land is reiterated in Eliot’s following poems as an
expression of the _via negativa_: the process of seeking to know God or spiritual truth by knowing what it is not. This process of negation recurs as a motif to be elaborated upon throughout _Four Quartets_ and presents, in another form, Eliot’s idea “that the thought of the intellectual believer ‘proceeds by rejection and elimination’ until he finds an explanation for both the disordered world without and the moral world within” (Gordon 211). It is this idea which Eliot approaches in the second stanza of part two of “Burnt Norton.” After describing a picture of an ordered universe in stanza one (Preston 15), the speaker goes on to attempt to approach the description of his vision of spiritual reality. Since, as I have noted earlier in Chapter Two of this study, the vision of mystical insight cannot be readily described, Eliot describes his vision in terms of what he knows it is not.

_At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;_

_Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,_

_But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,_

_Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,_

_Neither ascent nor decline._ (BN II, 62-66)

The overwhelming characteristic of this “heart of light” is stillness; it is silence. It is not fixity, for it is timeless and infinitely filled with significance. This stillness appears to its possessor to be the complete antithesis to the time-bound world of flux, which he now views with a sense of horror at its distance from perfection. This vision of stillness offers

_The inner freedom from the practical desire,_

_The release from action and suffering, release from the inner_

_And the outer compulsion, yet [it is] surrounded_
By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving,

_Erhebung_ without motion, concentration

Without elimination, both a new world
And the old made explicit, understood

In the completion of its partial ecstasy,

The resolution of its partial horror. (BN II, 70-78)

The speaker has experienced a release from all the “realities” of the old world—the practical desire, the action and suffering, and the inner and outer compulsion. Therefore, he can finally say that he understands it and that order has been restored. What could only be partial ecstasy before is now complete. The horror of what seemed to be the chaos of a futile existence is resolved.

Accordingly, as Underhill explains in _Mysticism_, this vision urges the seer to purge himself of his harmful attachment to that “old world” so that he can seek the “new” one of stillness and perfection. Here is the choice between God and uselessness that Weitz argues underlies each part of the _Quartets_. However, since “Time past and time future / Allow but a little consciousness” (83-84), developing a different, spiritual consciousness will necessitate nothing less than the complete destruction of the self as it normally relates to the material world in time. Just as any attachment to the wasteland had to be severed by the giving up of the self in “What the Thunder Said,” so too will that attachment have to be severed in the _Quartets._

This purgation begins in the opening stanza of the third part of “Burnt Norton.” Significantly, this stanza of the _Quartets_ also aptly describes many of the urban episodes
of *The Waste Land*. As Helen Gardner notes in “The Composition of *Four Quartets,*” section three of “Burnt Norton” is set in the London Tube station (86). The speaker, taking on an accusatory manner similar to the prophetic tone in the second stanza of *The Waste Land*, describes the station as a “place of disaffection” in which the average person is alienated from the absolute, only able to see “Time before and time after / In a dim light” (90-92). The scene completely lacks the positive qualities conveyed by the speaker’s earlier vision of eternal stillness. There is

neither daylight

Investing form with lucid stillness

[. . .]

Nor darkness to purify the soul

Emptying the sensual with deprivation

Cleansing affection from the temporal. (BN III, 93-98)

The separation of desire from the temporal that allows contemplation of reality escapes the people here. They are living exercises in futility. “Distracted from distraction by distraction / Filled with fancies and empty of meaning” (101-2), the people of this “twittering world” are like “bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind / That blows before and after time” (114, 104-5). Eliot, creating a striking metaphor for the foul spiritual state he sees about him, envisions their breath collectively as an “Eructation of unhealthy souls [. . .] that sweeps the gloomy hills of London” and then spreads all over England. The stanza concludes by affirming the absence in this apathetic world of the sensual deprivation that can allow spiritual insight: “Not here / not here the darkness, in this
twittering world” (113). Ending this stanza with “darkness,” the poet effectively transitions to a meditation on the darkness of sense one must acquire in order to escape the cycle of temporal diversion from the more important spiritual reality.

I find it helpful to regard the second stanza of this section of “Burnt Norton” in light of lines 417-422 of The Waste Land, in which the thunder gives the third Hindu virtue: Damyata. If, as Bindu Mohanty has argued, Damyata can be interpreted as the command to “give yourself up,” then the phrase “beating obedient / To controlling hands” in lines 421-422 describes the results of giving oneself up and severing all attachment to the vanity of the wasteland. Just as in this passage containing the three virtues, the second stanza of the third section of “Burnt Norton” comes directly after a sustained description of a land absent of spiritual growth. Accordingly, both passages show that the proper course of action to escape the wasteland is to confront it and die to it by giving oneself up. Only after this figurative death can there be any chance at a resurrection of the spiritual self. This dying to the temporal is the task detailed in lines 114-119 of “Burnt Norton”:

Descend lower, descend only
Into the world of perpetual solitude,
World not world, but that which is not world,
Internal darkness, deprivation
And destitution of all property,
Desiccation of the world of sense, (BN III, 120).
Only in this “dead” state of deprivation and poverty of spirit can one be possessed by the absolute rather than by the overwhelming distraction of fragmented experiences in the world of flux.

Underhill provides a helpful explanation of the nature of this death to desire in terms of the virtue of Poverty: “The Poverty of the mystics [. . .] is a mental rather than a material state. Detachment of the will from all desire of possessions is the inner reality, [. . .]. It is the poor in spirit, not the poor in substance who are to be spiritually blessed” (211). She goes on to cite St. John of the Cross, a Christian mystic whose Ascent of Mt. Carmel Eliot directly quotes several times throughout the Quartets and who also describes this humility in terms of the virtue of poverty. “‘The soul’ says St John of the Cross, ‘is not empty, so long as the desire for sensible [or sensual] things remains. But the absence of this desire produces emptiness and liberty of soul; even when there is an abundance of possessions’” (211). So for St. John of the Cross as well as Eliot, the goal is similar. Both advocate a form of poverty in order to gain, or regain, “The inner freedom from the practical desire, / The release from action and suffering” (“Burnt Norton” 71-72).

Thus, the relevance of Eliot’s longest direct quotation in the Quartets, which Eliot takes from John of the Cross’s Ascent of Mount Carmel, becomes clear in light of the thematic relationship between these two writers in the Mystic literary tradition. At the end of Part III of “East Coker,” Eliot gives yet another rephrasing of the necessity of confronting the folly of humanity’s attempts to subsist entirely on what can be found in
the material world around it. St. John’s description of the process of detachment helps to explain the reason that readers had to confront such darkness in *The Waste Land*:

In order to arrive there,

To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,

You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.

In order to arrive at what you do not know

You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.

In order to possess what you do not possess

You must go by the way of dispossession. (EC III, 135-41)

It is precisely this emphasis on the positive application of the negative in the *Four Quartets* that creates a unity of theme with *The Waste Land*. Just as the poet of *The Waste Land* emphasizes spiritual sickness and death in order to get readers to arrive at what they do not know—that they are among the spiritually dying and that they must detach themselves from that world—so does the poet of the *Four Quartets* attempt to elucidate the fact that the path that has to be taken in order to arrive at eternal health runs directly through a waste land. In order to possess what they did not possess—that is, a healthy spiritual condition—the readers had to go by the way of dispossession and rid themselves of attachment to all that Eliot considered waste in the modern human condition.

Eliot puts the same idea of detachment that appears in “Burnt Norton” and “East Coker” in other words in “Little Gidding”:

If you came this way,
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,

At any time or at any season,

It would always be the same: you would have to put off

Sense and notion. You are not here to verify,

Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity

Or carry report. You are here to kneel

Where prayer has been valid. (LG, I 41-48)

The most difficult passages of The Waste Land demonstrate the same idea. Amidst the fragmented world of flux and transience, you learn that you are not here to verify meaning. Rather you are here to verify the horrible sense of meaninglessness and, in doing so, realize that you are nothing. St. Catherine, cited in Mysticism, explains this intrinsic value of humility in detail: “the starved and tortured spirit learns [...] to accept lovelessness for the sake of Love, Nothingness for the sake of all” (397). Underhill further records what St. Catherine means in advocating the acceptance of nothingness for the sake of all: “‘In order to raise the soul from imperfection’ said the voice of God to St. Catherine in her dialogue, ‘I withdraw myself from her sentiment, [...] which I do in order to humiliate her, and cause her to seek Me in truth’” (398). In essence, this is the key to the development of spiritual consciousness that both The Waste Land and the Four Quartets seek engender in the reader: humility.

So far, in this examination of the Four Quartets, it is clear that Eliot has effectively said what was implied by the death-and-resurrection sequences of The Waste Land: since the temporal world is meaningless and dying and since there also exists a
perfect, eternal world of spirit, we ought to practice humility and detach ourselves from
the temporal, essentially dying to it, in order to be able to gain spiritual health. Most, if
not all, of the essential parts of this message are already developed fully by the end of
part three of the first quartet. Many of the passages within the rest of the Quartets provide
variations on this single theme.

One such variation on that theme occurs in a reference to Dante’s Inferno in the
second part of “East Coker.” Here, the poet has been dealing with the disillusionment that
accompanies old age and has concluded that “There is, it seems to us, / At best, only a
limited value / In the knowledge derived from experience” (EC II, 81-83). This “wisdom”
gained from experience is, in reality, merely a demonstration of the first epigraph to
“Burnt Norton,” which proposes that most men are unable to develop a sense of “the
Reason Universal” and feel as though they have “a wisdom of their own.” Significantly,
Eliot describes the meaning that lies behind this disillusionment of old age by alluding to
the famous opening of the Inferno.

In the middle, not only in the middle of the way
But all the way, in a dark wood, in a bramble,
On the edge of a grimpen [bog], where is no secure foothold,
And menaced by monsters, fancy lights,
Risking enchantment. (EC II, 89-93)

The speaker, even though he is growing old and should have wisdom to show for it,
describes himself as being lost. The fundamental lesson to be learned is the complete
vanity of knowledge derived from temporal existence. Dante had to face that vanity by
traversing the realm of human folly in hell. He then had to purge the self of that folly in order to gain the possibility of unity with the absolute in paradise. According to Underhill, “Dante’s whole journey up the Mount of Purgation is the dramatic presentation of this one truth” (202). This idea effectively explains the conclusion of Part II of “East Coker.” The speaker has to open his eyes to see the pervasiveness of human folly in order to be able to divest himself of it. Thus, having proposed what seems to be the limited nature of knowledge that is derived from experience, Eliot goes on to advocate humility, the emptying of the self which allows it to be filled with the spiritual. It is this state of humility, repeatedly described throughout the Quartets, which the vain “old men” of “East Coker,” are said to fear:

Do not let me hear

Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly,

Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession,

Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God.

The only wisdom we can hope to acquire

Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.

The houses are all gone under the sea.

The dancers are all gone under the hill. (EC III, 93-100)

The realization that all of the material world and its folly will eventually be wiped away is a triumph of the spiritual consciousness in and of itself. This understanding urges the speaker to practice humility and to give himself up.
Later on, in the fourth section of “East Coker,” Eliot writes perhaps one of the most explicit statements of this notion that death to the physical is the prerequisite to a life invested with spiritual meaning. The terminology specifically refers to Christ, and suggests that the first step in understanding the overall order of the universe is to see the inherent sickness of the world that was created by Original Sin. The four stanzas of Part IV develop an allegory in which Christ is seen as a wounded surgeon or dying nurse—presumably because he had to be sacrificed for the health of mankind—and a ruined millionaire—so called because Christ is God come from heaven to live as a man, suffer, and die. The second stanza of the four clearly suggests that the overwhelming reality of original sin is a rudimentary and integral lesson of the orthodox Christian narrative.

Our only health is the disease
If we obey the dying nurse
Whose constant care is not to please
But to remind of our, and Adam’s curse,
And that, to be restored our sickness must grow worse. (EC IV, 152-156)

Eliot reiterates this idea, which is fundamental to understanding of both The Waste Land and the Four Quartets, in this section and several times in the rest of the Quartets so as to prevent any misunderstanding. In lines 164-166 especially, the symbolism is precisely that of the saint or Christian mystic.

If to be warmed, then I must freeze
And quake in frigid purgatorial fires
Of which the flame is roses, and the smoke is briars. (EC IV)
Echoing his opening of *The Waste Land*, Eliot suggests that in order to start developing the spiritual self by purging it of waste (briars), one has to realize that so much of himself and his world is essentially frozen and spiritually lifeless. The section ends with an absolutely superb restatement of this paradox, symbolized by the ritual of communion on Good Friday.

> The dripping blood our only drink
> The bloody flesh our only food:
> In spite of which we like to think
> That we are sound, substantial flesh and blood—
> Again, in spite of that, we call this Friday good. (EC IV, 167-171)

In other words, acknowledging that the temporal world, and we along with it, is dying and that our existence in this world therefore must be full of suffering and sacrifice is man’s only hope of obtaining spiritual health and life. Here, in the fourth section of “East Coker,” Eliot has wrapped up the primary message of *The Waste Land* and the Four Quartets beautifully.

Although I feel that I have analyzed sufficient evidence from the Four Quartets to effectively demonstrate its thematic similarities to *The Waste Land*, it will be well worthwhile to examine one or two more passages, which come from the conclusion of Eliot’s Four Quartets. Indeed, any treatment of this series must not leave out “Little Gidding.” For, as Helen Gardner notes, this quartet “was to be more than a fourth poem of the same kind as its predecessors. It had to gather up the earlier ones and be the crown and conclusion of the series” (21). As such, it is a reasonable assumption that “Little
Gidding” will end with a sense of closure central to the overall statement of the poem. Quintessentially, the conclusion of the poem, besides ending with an allusion to yet another Christian Mystic (Julian of Norwich), leaves the reader with that completion of the “partial ecstasy” and resolution of the “partial horror” that came along with the beatific vision in “Burnt Norton,” Part II. “Little Gidding” essentially ends where “What the Thunder Said” ended, in the freedom and love of the “Silence”:

Quick now, here, now, always—

A condition of complete simplicity

(Costing not less than everything)

And all shall be well and

All manner of thing shall be well

When the tongues of flame are in-folded

Into the crowned knot of fire

And the fire and the rose are one. (LG V, 252-259)

The rose—the image of the Absolute’s love for mankind—and the fire—the purgatorial, cleansing flame that earth must become for any who would read the deeper meaning of the universe—are discovered to be one and the same. Here again, is the answer to the overwhelming question that was raised in Part IV of “Little Gidding”:

Who then devised the torment? Love.

Love is the unfamiliar Name

Behind the hands that wove

The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove. (207-211)

Finally, the developing spiritual consciousness has resolved the “enigma of the fever chart” that is the world, even in light of all its apparent meaninglessness and suffering. Here is shantih; here is the peace that passes understanding. Love created the waste land.

* * *

Conclusion

So, having read both poems with the mystic tradition in mind, we find that each can be incorporated under one, essential statement: the fire and the rose are one, and they were created by God out of love for humanity. Granted, The Waste Land, in accordance with much of high modernism, focuses more on the fire. In it one sees the meaningless nature of ordinary life. That is what Eliot meant his readers to see. It is therefore unsurprising that so many have found in the poem an expression of the chaos that seemed to characterize a paradoxical generation full of scientific progress and world war. Yet neither The Waste Land nor the Four Quartets propose that confusion is the end. We are not, as readers of Eliot, to throw our hands up in resignation to the vanity we see before us. We are not to embrace the lack of truth as the only truth. Rather, we are to understand that our enmity for the chaotic world around us is indicative of a yearning for an ever-present, but elusive, ordering love. Accordingly, both poems clearly urge us to move past the disorder, just as the chaos of the first half of the twentieth century compelled Eliot and many of the other modernists to attempt the common task of ordering the fragments left after the wars and after science had cast doubt upon an easier faith. But, as Eliot
ultimately acknowledges, the fragments of our life on earth cannot be reordered by the human imagination; for they have always been ordered by the unsearchable imagination of the Absolute. Thus, humility is the only wisdom. There is only one reason that peace and stillness can end both poems; the pilgrim has given himself up to the machinations of the divine among whom the fire and the rose are eternally unified.

If we allow the validity of such an assertion, our reading of The Waste Land changes drastically. The Sibyl’s wish to die in the epigraph to the poem ceases to be a mere resigned death-wish and becomes the cry of one who has seen an underlying reality and wishes to detach herself completely from a decaying material existence. We understand, now, that the most fragmented and confusing sections of the poem are approaches to a verbal equivalent of the immediate perceptions of the ordinary, modern mind in time. Distractions enter the poem because humans are so often distracted. They cannot bear very much reality, and accordingly, their mind jumps from sensory perception to sensory perception in a “distraction fit” that allows very little pausing for reflection (DS IV, 208). The wasteland lacks water not because there is no water, but because it exists elsewhere, in a spiritual realm. References to common forms of religion or spirituality no longer seem entirely out of place. They describe shantih, the place we want to be, the place we can be if we reject the Unreal City, the fruitless sex described in the dialogue in the bar, the offer of Mr. Eugenides, and the moment between the typist and the young man carbuncular—if we see, along with the poet, that this world is indeed a wasteland and that we ought to embrace another. In other words, if we realize that we, like Phlebus the Phoenician in “Death by Water,” must ultimately suffer the physical
death of the body, then we will not grudge undergoing the necessary spiritual death
which severs our attachment to the body and its physical surroundings. And if we reject it
all, allowing ourselves to be humiliated by the pervasiveness of our hatred and vice, then
we sever the ties that bind us to the wheel of fortune, freeing ourselves to understand the
silence and to be filled with the heart of light. Having passed through the wasteland, we,
like the speaker who closes “What the Thunder Said,” will sit upon the shore with the
arid plain behind us. We too will know that London Bridge is falling down and with it
falls the entire physical world, crumbling into dust. We will be mindful of the end of our
suffering, just as Dante was told to be by Arnaut Daniel in Purgatorio before Daniel hid
himself in the refining fire. And the fragments of our perception will have been
effectively shored against the ruins of our decaying body, propping up our souls. Datta.
WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED


