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"Divine Parameters: A Reading of Four Quartets"

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# Divine Parameters: A Reading of *Four Quartets*\*

JAY PARINI

Within its vital boundary, in the mind,  
We say God and the imagination are one . . .  
How high that highest candle lights the dark.

Wallace Stevens

God is the poetry caught in any religion.

Les Murray

I

Poetry is, at its best, a kind of scripture. It represents the inspired language of generations, language that helps us to live our lives by directing us along certain paths. It's not just that poetry matters, but certain poems matter. I have myself looked to specific poems for inspiration over many decades: among the great modern poets, I have been especially fond of poems by Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens and T. S. Eliot. In this essay, I will look closely at one of my favourite poems, Eliot's *Four Quartets*, as an example of poetry that has helped me to live my life. I'll examine this poem—in fact, a sequence of interlocking poems—as a kind of spiritual guide. Readers must, of course, find the poems that matter personally to them: this is the adventure of reading. They will find them if they try. But I want to recommend Eliot's sequence as a good place to start.

The *Quartets* offer us the deep wisdom of a lifetime spent in contemplation. It's visionary in the best sense of that overused term, and one that puts before readers a broad, ecumenical but essentially Christian, synthesis. Once again, and quite wilfully, perhaps, I intend to look at this poem as I always have, as directions for living. Eliot attempts to answer questions that, to me, seem basic and compelling: What is the human condition? How do we understand time, and our place in the

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chronological cosmos? Do we have a purpose on this earth? What are the truths that literature and scripture can teach us? (By 'scripture' I refer not only to the Bible but to the great tradition of wisdom literature, on which Eliot draws freely throughout the *Quartets*.) And finally: What role does art have to play in helping us to understand these questions, and to puzzle out answers?

## II

The sequence bears an epigraph, in Greek, that consists of two fragments from Heraclitus, a Presocratic philosopher. Let me quote them in English:

*Although the logos is common to everyone, most people behave as though they have a wisdom of their own.*

*The way up and the way down are the same way.*

These enigmatic fragments provide a subtle key to the spiritual meaning of the *Quartets*. In the first, one encounters that complex and untranslatable word, *logos*. In the beginning was the word, *logos*, begins the Gospel of John. The Greek word, especially in the New Testament, refers, as it always has, to the core of truth, a sense of deep and ongoing reality, the timeless word that 'was God', as John says, 'in the beginning', and which persists, outside of time. *Logos* means 'pattern' as well: the eternal pattern of the cosmos. *Logos* refers to the kingdom of heaven that lies within us. It is freedom from the wheel of life, as this was first articulated in Hindu philosophy. It is silence itself, the goal of all poetry, all art, all religious practice. And by 'religion' I mean that term again in its literal or root sense, as *re-ligio*, meaning to 'link back', to reconnect to *logos*, the deep pattern, the still centre, that eternal moment which we *commonly* experience, as Heraclitus suggests, but which we lose in the chatter and bustle of life, as we each try foolishly and helplessly to achieve some wisdom of our own, something beyond the obvious and eternal wisdom that remains at hand, within our reach, actually within us.

To revert to a simple cosmology: we look up at the 'heavens' for God, for *logos*, for meaning. And yet we look down as well, Heraclitus suggests. This is of course a spatial metaphor: up and down. But these

vertical routes are the 'same way'. In essence Heraclitus (at least to me) suggests that there are contrary ways to arrive at enlightenment, to discover the silent space within us, to become—in the Christian phrase that has become rather trashy in recent years—'saved'.

The 'way and the truth and the life' that the Gospel writer talks about in *John* (14:6) are really ways and truths and lives, but they all point to one centre, one word, *logos*. This may seem obscure, but I hope that what I'm saying will gradually become clear in the context of Eliot's text.

### III

First consider the general shape of each *Quartet*. The term itself, of course, has musical associations, and one sees a distinct melodic structure in each of these five-part sequences. (I would note for the record that the quartet, as developed by Haydn and explored by Beethoven, Bartók, and others, was usually a four-part sequence.) As in a musical quartet, themes in each of Eliot's quartets are established, revisited, and synthesized. The music of poetry was a vivid subject for him: he always composed with melody in mind, as melody is pattern, and a poem may be considered the search for a deep rhythmic and melodic pattern, a kind of speech that, like music itself, speaks past speech.

Another obvious thing about the *Quartets* is that each poem is rooted in a place that possessed autobiographical resonance for Eliot, a place of what he called 'significant soil'. 'Burnt Norton' refers to a house in Gloucestershire which Eliot visited in 1934, and the poem meditates on a visionary or mystical experience in the rose garden of that house. 'East Coker' refers to a village by the same name in Somerset, from which one of Eliot's ancestors departed for the New World in 1669. 'The Dry Salvages' is a reference to a cluster of rocks off the coast of Cape Ann, north of Boston, where Eliot spent many holidays as a boy. Finally, 'Little Gidding', the fourth quartet, refers to a village in Cambridgeshire which Eliot visited in 1936. It was the site of an Anglican religious community visited by Charles I in 1633; the king returned there in 1646, in flight from anti-royalist government troops, who destroyed the community. In a sense, 'Little Gidding' is a poem of restoration, in the broadest sense of that term: the Restoration of the monarch, and the restoration of the kingdom of God within us.

In each quartet there are five sections. The first is philosophical, though grounded in a particular place and time, as the title indicates. General themes are established, as in a musical quartet. Words and phrases are put into play, and Eliot returns to them repeatedly, almost liturgically. In the second section, Eliot typically opens with a tightly rhymed and densely symbolic lyric. In the rather prosy second part of each second section, he meditates on the preceding lyric, restating its themes in a more general way. In the third section, Eliot takes the way down, the dark way, the *via negativa* or 'dark night of the soul'. The imagery of hell frequently recurs, sometimes in the London Underground—a metaphor for living hell. In the fourth section, usually a short lyric of intense darkness and compression, Eliot drops into hell, going deeper and deeper—hell being defined as a place where God is absent, and where the divine pattern of the cosmos cannot be seen or felt. From here, Eliot invariably moves toward the elevated language of the fifth section, which—not unlike the second section—divides into two parts. In the first, Eliot meditates on the use of art, including poetry and scripture. He writes in a personal way here, with astonishing directness and honesty, standing before us bluntly, in humility and poise. These beautiful parts—always my favourite—lead into the majestic final chorus, the second half of each fifth section, where all the trumpets sound, the flowers open, and themes struck in the first sections are revisited, restated, synthesized.

#### IV

Eliot wrote 'Burnt Norton' as a single and independent poem, only later seeing the possibility of a sequence. A visionary experience dominates the first section, in the rose garden of the abandoned house. The magnificent vision fills a drained pool: 'Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged'. Suddenly the pool is 'filled with water out of sunlight', and a lotus flower is manifest: 'And the lotus rose, quietly, quietly.' The flower becomes 'the heart of light'. But this vision, like all beatific visions, cannot sustain itself within human time, clock time, the time of seasons and revolutions of the earth. A cloud passes, and the vision fades. Eliot writes, poignantly: 'Human kind cannot bear very much reality.' It's a fabulous line, lifted from Eliot's earlier play about a slaughtered archbishop, *Murder in the Cathedral*. This reality, which necessarily overwhelms humankind, is the reality of God, the

reality of unmediated vision. Eliot knows only too well that ordinary men and woman cannot hope to dwell in the white heat of that intense light.

Eliot draws in this section on his knowledge of Buddhist scriptures, as seen in his reference to the lotus flower, a traditional Eastern symbol of enlightenment. This brings us to another central symbol in this sequence: the tree. This tree is, first, the Bodhi or Bo tree, under which the Buddha sat for seven years before attaining enlightenment. For Eliot the Bo tree here prefigures the ultimate tree, the cross of Christ, embodied in the yew tree that he refers to later, yew being a wood associated with the cross by Christian tradition. But another tree appears in section two of 'Burnt Norton', the 'bedded axle-tree'. This is the deep image at the centre of his tightly rhymed, tetrameter lyric in section two:

Garlic and sapphires in the mud  
Clot the bedded axle-tree.  
The trilling wire in the blood  
Sings below inveterate scars  
And reconciles forgotten wars.

The axle-tree is drawn from Norse mythology, where it's called Yggdrasil, the world-tree. In the myth, all of creation rises from the roots of this fundamental tree. The world turns around it. Eliot ponders the image in the second half of this section, the prosy part, where he writes about the 'still point of the turning world', alluding to the paradox of the wheel: the rim goes round and round, but the axle, the centre, remains still. This refers obliquely to the Hindu wheel of life, too. This is the point 'where past and future are gathered', and it's where the dance is: an orderly and celebratory dance, which finds its culmination in the next quartet, 'East Coker', with its vision of a seventeenth-century village in Somerset, as the inhabitants, hand in hand, dance around a fire: 'Keeping time,/Keeping the rhythm in their dancing/As in their living in the living seasons.'

From this follows one of Eliot's great catalogues, with its loud verbal echoes of *Ecclesiastes*:

The time of the seasons and the constellations  
The time of milking and the time of harvest

The time of the coupling of man and woman  
 And that of beasts. Feet rising and falling.  
 Eating and drinking. Dung and death.

What life *should* be like is put before us as the dance of community, the dance of lovers, in the rhythms of the seasons that mirror the seasons of life, all moving around the central fire, a flame that leaps toward heaven: the concluding and summarizing image of *Four Quartets*, as pictured in the final lines of 'Little Gidding'—an image of the rose, which is what Dante encountered in the *Paradiso*.

First, however, Eliot escorts us into the dark of Section Three, 'a place of disaffection'. In the London Underground, as in all unholy places in the city, one encounters faces 'distracted from distraction by distraction', as Eliot puts it so well. Everywhere one sees 'Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind'. We follow the important men of business and government and culture as they plunge into the underground: 'O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark.' Eliot merely quotes here, deftly, lifting a haunting line from Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, summoning a vision of human despair. And so we regard those who live by appetite alone: 'The captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters', and so forth. No prominence in life allows one to escape from the fact of mortality. Everyone must come to terms with the limits of life, and its possibilities as well: those 'hints and guesses' that point to one end, which is always present: the Eternal Now.

Of course Eliot is wise enough not to disparage the dark way, as the way down and the way up, as Heraclitus suggested, are the same way. This represents a genuine way of knowledge: 'You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance,' the poet tells us. 'In order to possess what you do not possess/You must go by the way of dispossession.'

We all have all, at times, gone our own ways of dispossession, lost in our own appetites, burrowing into solitude, taking no hints, making no guesses, shutting out the possibility of light and love. 'Human kind cannot bear very much reality.' And so we withdraw, we forget, we refuse to 'wait and pray', as the scriptures instruct us, and as Eliot concludes in the fifth part of 'The Dry Salvages', in a passage remarkable for its wisdom, its depth and beauty:

But to apprehend  
 The point of intersection of the timeless

With time, is an occupation for the saint—  
 No occupation either, but something given  
 And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,  
 Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.  
 For most of us, there is only the unattended  
 Moment, the moment in and out of time,  
 The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,  
 The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning  
 Or the waterfall, or the music heard so deeply  
 That it is not heard at all, but you are the music  
 While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,  
 Hints followed by guesses; and the rest  
 Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.

I can't imagine a better prescription for what ails us: Prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action. Beyond these things, life consists of hints and guesses, and perhaps those unattended moments when we hear something lovely, or smell something odd and memorable, or stumble on a line of poetry that sticks, or meet someone who moves us, or discover in the patterns of nature the lineaments of our own spirit.

I would especially mark the last word in Eliot's prescription: action. 'And right action is freedom,' he says. Right action leads to 'freedom/ From past and future'. This freedom is the ultimate liberation, betokening release from the wheel of time. Right action must be subject to the individual conscience as well as communal norms. One comes to action last, as Eliot notes, having moved through prayer, observance, discipline, and thought. Without the previous four things, right action is difficult of access, perhaps impossible to discern. And right action, always, occurs in time, as choices are made, paths taken or refused.

Eliot's sense of time is deeply informed by his knowledge of Buddhist and Hindu thought, which he alludes to frequently in the *Quartets*, as in the third part of 'The Dry Salvages', with a reference to Krishna. In the Eastern tradition, a distinction is made between clock time and eternal time. The first is chronological time, which moves from tick to tock, down the line, from birth to old age; this is the grid against which our lives unfold in lockstep fashion. On the other hand is eternal time, found at the 'still point of the turning world'. Eliot



works through various concepts of time in the *Quartets*, always moving toward liberation from time, or time as eternal presence, as the perpetual kingdom of God, 'a paradise within you, happier far', as Milton wrote in *Paradise Lost*.

What's interesting here, and very much Eliot's point, is that human beings cannot evade time. It's our duty to move through it, fastened to the wheel of life. As he writes in the magical final part of 'Little Gidding'—

A people without history  
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern  
Of timeless moments. So, while the light fails  
On a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel  
History is now and England.

History is now and England. It is time and place. It is also a pattern of timeless moments, and so Eliot traces those moments in his own life, at the ruined manor house called Burnt Norton, or in Somerset, where in the seventeenth century the Eliot family began its journey from the Old World to the New (where Eliot was born, in St Louis, Missouri, only to return to England for good in the early twentieth century, thus completing a circle of sorts). Finally, history is the site of the monastic community of Little Gidding, a place rich in resonance.

v

Place is crucial for Eliot, and specific places meant a great deal to him. 'The Dry Salvages' opens with a river: 'I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river/Is a strong brown god.' This river represents all rivers—to a degree—but mainly the glorious Mississippi, 'conveyor of commerce', as he writes. The river is useful but 'un-trustworthy', capable of immense destruction, in times of flood. Eliot recalls the presence of this river in his Missouri boyhood:

His rhythm was present in the nursery bedroom,  
In the rank ailanthus of the April dooryard,  
In the smell of grapes on the autumn table,  
And the evening circle in the winter gaslight.

An astonishing image follows, what literary critics would call a totalizing image, in that so much is gathered into its orbit of meaning: 'The river is within us, the sea is all about us.'

'The river is within us, the sea is all about us.' What we have here is a symbolic representation of time as chronological, as one-step-after-another, in contrast to time as *durée*, to use a word favoured by Henri Bergson, a philosopher whose lectures Eliot attended in Paris. The image contrasts time as a line with time as a circle, a perpetual and ever-present loop of reality: the goal of the river, if I may add a touch of teleology. The river stands in for clock-time, moving inexorably from source to mouth. It spills into the sea of eternity, is swallowed up, dissolved, as each of us returns to the eternal waters, our first home.

This latter truth, that the river of life ends where it begins, finds its aphoristic expression in 'East Coker', where Eliot writes: 'In my end is my beginning.' This French aphorism was adopted as a motto by Mary Queen of Scots, another of the several martyrs alluded to by Eliot in the *Quartets*. The obverse of this aphorism, equally true, opens the second quartet: 'In my beginning is my end.' The poem itself, opening and closing thus, performs a loop, biting its own tail and disappearing, like the mythical world serpent. Just as 'Burnt Norton' contemplates the difference between temporal and eternal times, 'East Coker' celebrates succession within temporal time as 'Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended, / Are removed, destroyed, restored.'

The opening stanza culminates in a grand catalogue of examples, echoing the language of the King James translation of *Ecclesiastes*:

Houses live and die: there is a time for building  
 And a time for living and for generation  
 And a time for the wind to break the loosened pane  
 And to shake the wainscot where the field-mouse trots  
 And to shake the tattered arras woven with a silent motto.

That silent motto was 'In my end is my beginning.' That is, through the door of death, we enter life, thus substituting the necessary (sometimes beautiful and sometimes arid) time of the clock for the perpetual present, which is ultimate reality: what Eliot glimpses briefly in the garden at Burnt Norton but cannot regard for long, as 'Human kind cannot bear very much reality.'

To historicize the poem for a moment, we should remember that

the first quartet was written in the late thirties, as political storm clouds darkened the skies of Europe. The last three quartets are war poems, although the war enters at an oblique angle. A friend of mine, a Scottish poet who fought in the Second World War, has told me about waiting eagerly, even frantically, for each of these quartets to appear during the war. He rushed to buy the brief pamphlets, which offered comfort in a time of darkness. But they contain that darkness as well, demonstrating that the way down and the way up are the same way.

In 'Little Gidding', the war emerges in all its literal force. Eliot, himself a fire warden during the London bombings, recalls walking out of the Underground after a night of fiery destruction:

In the uncertain hour before the morning  
Near the ending of interminable night  
At the recurrent end of the unending  
After the dark dove with the flickering tongue  
Had passed below the horizon of his homing  
While the dead leaves still rattled on like tin  
Over the asphalt where no other sound was  
Between three districts whence the smoke arose  
I met one walking . . .

One can hardly imagine a more vivid rendering of this experience, with German planes disappearing over the horizon, the dead leaves rattling over the asphalt. Souls wander the broken, burning city, looking for lost ones, lost homes, their own lost lives. The passage, a lengthy one, continues in the manner of Dante's *Inferno*, in occasionally rhyming triplets—very much an English approximation of Dante's *terza rima*. The poet encounters someone very like Dante himself, one of the several dead masters who preside over this poem. Dante's project was to 'purify the dialect of the tribe', as Eliot suggests, alluding to a phrase of Mallarmé's. His own goal is to purify the dialect of *his* tribe, to whatever extent such a thing can be accomplished.

The difficulty of doing this work, the poet's work, becomes a central theme in the final section of each quartet, where Eliot speaks most nakedly, often personally, about art. He writes about the struggle to express himself, and puts forward his understanding of what it would mean to write in a satisfactory way, as in 'Burnt Norton', where he says:

Words strain,  
 Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
 Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
 Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
 Will not stay still.

Mortal words cannot, of course, compare with *logos*, the 'Word in the desert', which was in the beginning, a word (and world) without end. 'Burnt Norton' moves toward a kind of irresolute resolution, a brief standing on the hill, as when divine reality was glimpsed in the rose garden—a scene that Eliot recapitulates in the last section of this quartet with the figures of strange dream-children who inhabit the garden and distract the speaker:

Sudden in a shaft of sunlight  
 Even while the dust moves  
 There rises the hidden laughter  
 Of children in the foliage  
 Quick now, here, now, always—  
 Ridiculous the waste sad time  
 Stretching before and after.

This 'waste sad time' is clock-time, which extends backward from the *now* as well as forward from it, but which is ridiculous and empty—at least by comparison with now, which—to jump forward to 'Little Gidding'—'Is England and nowhere. Never and always.'

In the final part of 'East Coker', Eliot writes again with astonishing candor. I can think of no better description of the work of writing:

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years—  
 Twenty years largely wasted, the years of *l'entre deux guerres*—  
 Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt  
 Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure  
 Because one has only learnt to get the better of words  
 For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which  
 One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture  
 Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate  
 With shabby equipment always deteriorating  
 In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,  
 Undisciplined squads of emotion.

Dante reappears, covertly by allusion, in the first line just quoted, the poet in 'middle way', which recalls the opening of the *Inferno*: '*Nel mezzo del camin di nostra vita/mi ritrovai per una selva oscura.*' In the middle of my road in my life's journey, I found myself in a dark wood.

Eliot's dark wood is verbal as well as spiritual. As a man of words, he has to search for those words, and the right arrangement of those words: the saving grace of language. But he understands the difficulty here. Language, at its best, points to silence, as he suggests in 'Burnt Norton'. But merely to say nothing is not to achieve silence. That is the paradox. One has to speak, to search out patterns, to scour the dark, in order to discover the chinks in time that reveal the light. This requires discipline, and reading, which is part of that discipline.

Needless to say, allusions permeate *Four Quartets*, where one hears references to St John of the Cross, Dante, Dame Julian of Norwich, voices from *Ecclesiastes* and the Gospels, from the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads*. Familiar compound ghosts appear and disappear, often obliquely. Eliot understood that language comes from language, and that the poet is always a guest at a great feast. He takes a helping and passes the serving dish. He fills his glass and passes the decanter. There are loaves and fishes in abundance, an endless supply of insight, a bounty of hints and guesses.

## VI

It's in the fifth section of 'Little Gidding', the fourth quartet, that Eliot brings his exploration of writing to a point of near perfection, drawing on phrases and rhythms heard in the previous three poems:

What we call the beginning is often the end  
 And to make an end is to make a beginning.  
 The end is where we start from. And every phrase  
 And sentence that is right (where every word is at home,  
 Taking its place to support the others,  
 The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,  
 An easy commerce of the old and the new,  
 The common word exact without vulgarity,  
 The formal word precise but not pedantic,  
 The complete consort dancing together)  
 Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,  
 Every poem an epigraph.

It was this easy commerce of the old and new that distinguished Eliot's career from the beginning, and which he theorized so brilliantly in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', the early essay that prefigures so much of his later poetic practice. Eliot knew that one must learn from the past. One must read and listen, meditate, and allow for the easy commerce of old and new. And one must stand humbly before the past, as a beginner, always relearning old truths, always coming to the same moment of perception, again and again, before the passing of the cloud, the dimming of the vision, and the return to solitude and verbal confusion. The chatter of daily life distracts us from distraction but never satisfies or saves us. Only the right words in time can do that.

This brings me to the original, rather vast and dizzying, questions posed at the outset. The answers to these questions will tell us why poetry matters, at least in part. So what is the human condition? How do we understand time, and our place in the chronological cosmos? Do we have a purpose on this earth? What are the truths that literature and scripture can teach us? What role does poetry in particular have to play in helping us to understand these questions?

Eliot argues, convincingly for me, that life is not without purpose, neither empty of meaning nor without a discernible pattern. We need time and history to redeem the time, and to transform hints and guesses into a clear vision. As he writes in 'Little Gidding', 'A people without history/Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern/Of timeless moments.' Eliot directs us to respect silence in its perfected form, a condition which art anticipates in haphazardly beautiful ways. And so, in 'Burnt Norton', he tells us:

Only by the form, the pattern,  
Can words or music reach  
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still  
Moves perpetually in its stillness.

Eliot is never Panglossian, or overly optimistic, to say the least. The human condition as revealed in this sequence of poems is bleak indeed; there is war, poverty, illness, estrangement, and remorse. Eliot has put all of this before us. Yet I take comfort in Eliot's sources of comfort:

After the kingfisher's wing  
Has answered light to light, and is silent, the light is still  
At the still point of the turning world.

The kingfisher is an allusion to Christ, and for Eliot, Christ is *logos* himself, the embodied Word in the desert. The world tree is the cross, the symbolic intersection of history with eternity: the timeless moment in time, the crux of reality. Eliot sees Christ as the culmination of spiritual questing. He sees the cross as a metaphor for the life of suffering that each must bear, and that he considers the appropriate burden for what we get in the end: a perfect silence in which everything comes clear. Eliot quotes stunningly—just one bold line, set off on its own, a stanza to itself, from the anonymous mystical text, *The Cloud of Unknowing*: ‘With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling.’

With this Love and this Calling both in capital letters, one can hardly miss the meaning: love is the restorative impulse, the antidote to war, to poverty, to hatred and remorse. This is love as charity (*caritas*). It is love in its worldliest incarnation, as *eros*. It is love in all its divine and barely comprehensible beauty, glimpsed only sideways by those of us still in time, in the hints and guesses that pass before us.

‘And the voice of this Calling’—this is the calling of the poet as well as the saint. It is the calling of each human being in the hard but rewarding search for meaning, the search for soul-definition, which is also the search for community, as we gather, hand in hand, in the dance around the village fire that Eliot himself regards at sunset in the tiny village in Somerset where, centuries ago, his own journey began even before he came into fleshly existence. Eliot quotes here from a sixteenth-century book by his own distant ancestor and namesake, Sir Thomas Elyot:

In that open field  
 If you do not come too close, if you do not come too close,  
 On a summer midnight, you can hear the music  
 Of the weak pipe and the little drum  
 And see them dancing around the bonfire  
 The association of man and woman  
 In daunsinge, signifying matrimonie –  
 A dignified and commodious sacrament.  
 Two and two, necessarye coniunction,  
 Holding eche other by the hand or the arm  
 Which betokeneth concorde.

In all, *Four Quartets* draws together a lifetime of reading and contemplation by Eliot. It's a densely allusive but, in the end, surprisingly straightforward piece of writing. It spins through the four seasons, the four elements, taking its hints and guesses from the four winds. It moves in history, in time, in the time of this poet and his residence on earth—stopping in Missouri, in Massachusetts, in the various English sites conjured here and there. But, most crucially, it offers us a pattern, a way out, which is the way up and the way down as well. It offers us, as the epigraph from Heraclitus promises, a communal sense of truth—a *logos*—that is always before us, ours for the taking.