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“Not in Time’s Covenant:” Questions of Time and Eschatology in Heidegger and T.S. Eliot

„Nie w przymierzu z czasem”¹. Kwestie czasu i eschatologii u Heideggera i T.S. Eliota

Abstract: This essay juxtaposes T.S. Eliot’s conception of eschatological time with Heidegger’s existential conception of time as sheer finitude. I argue that Eliot in his late *Four Quartets* makes the case for time as inevitably, albeit unpredictably, permeated by epiphanic moments of fullness and, thus, as imbued with an eschatological quality. Drawing on Joseph Ratzinger’s work, I argue that eschatological time in Eliot, particularly in the last of his *Four Quartets*, “Little Gidding,” is inseparable from a form of religious community that is steeped in an ethos of humility.

Keywords: time, temporality, finitude, eschatology, Martin Heidegger, T.S. Eliot, Joseph Ratzinger

Streszczenie: Artykuł zestawia eschatologiczną koncepcję czasu T.S. Eliota z Heideggerowskim spojrzeniem na czas jako czystą skończoność. Autor wykazuje, że w *Czterech kwartetach*, należących do jego późnej twórczości, Eliot przedstawia czas jako nieuchronnie, aczkolwiek nieprzewidywalnie, przeniknięty epifanicznymi momentami pełni, i stąd przepojony eschatologicznym walorem. Odwołując się do prac biskupa Ratzingera, autor twierdzi, że u Eliota, a zwłaszcza w ostatnim z czterech *Kwartetów*, *Little Gidding*, eschatologiczny czas jest nierozłącznie związany z pewną formą religijnej wspólnoty zanurzonej w etosie pokory.

Słowa kluczowe: czas, czasowość, skończoność, eschatologia, Martin Heidegger, T.S. Eliot, Joseph Ratzinger

I

This essay explores an issue that in present-day Western societies has all but vanished from ordinary everyday awareness, albeit at a great cost to those living in these societies. It concerns our naturalistic view of the human being as wholly

¹ T.S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*, tłum. W. Dulęba [w:] idem, *Poezje wybrane*, Warszawa 1960, s. 253 [przyp. red.].

circumscribed by chronometric time. On this account, each one of us is born, spends time on various pursuits and, having run out of time, expires according to group-specific, statistical averages. Understood as sheer physical “life-expectancy,” this anthropomorphic conception of time is by now deemed so “natural” as not to warrant (or permit) any further investigation. We should note, however, that a strictly computational model of time necessarily proceeds by dividing time and, as a result, renders it notional and abstract. As early as 1781, Immanuel Kant thus defined time as a “pure category of the understanding,” little more than the formal condition for identifying causal relationships or sequencing information and events of all kinds. Taken in itself, that is, chronometric time has no content, no fullness, no rhythmic complexity, no meaning, and no presence. It can never become an object of experience *per se* because it is (so Kant maintains) but the formal condition of all possible experience. As such, time only ever lapses into oblivion; it is but the diminishing thread by which we measure the “not yet” of an anticipated (or dreaded) future as it approaches the imperceptible threshold of the present, only to vanish into the “no longer” of the past. Time is only ever “spent,” expends itself, is lost, wasted, consumed, and thus denudes present experience of its meaning and fullness no sooner than it has taken place.

This dominant, naturalist conception of time also constrains our conception of meaning. Thus, from a naturalist perspective, meaning cannot be a gift (the very notion of which has long come under suspicion) but, instead, is merely what human agents fabricate within the domain of finite, sequential time. Never received, let alone revealed as a transcendent “pattern” (a term altogether central to Eliot’s *Four Quartets*), meaning is seen as having been “constructed” by past human generations whose descendants will seek to frame it in impartial, “objective” form; or, in academic parlance, all meaning is “historical.” For the naturalist, the world stands exclusively under the jurisdiction of *homo faber*, who never views reality as given but only ever as manufactured and exchanged. Correlated with the naturalism’s view of time as sheer finitude is a strictly anthropomorphic view of **knowledge** – a term that no longer denotes the experience of richly textured and spiritually significant **meanings** but, instead, is deemed convertible **information**: objective, quantifiable, verifiable, useful, and fungible. An acutely time-sensitive commodity whose value hinges on its **timely** use in the marketplace, information functions within the 24-hour news cycle, the trading of stocks, derivatives on Wall Street, a virtual commodity to be selectively shared or cannily withheld. Where knowledge is exclusively indexed to time – viz., as information – it holds no intrinsic meaning but only ever a use-value. Conversely, our relationship to time future is shaped by a desire for it to be unlike the past, not to be determined by it in any way. Instead, the future ought to be novel, chock-full of promise and sensation, albeit in ways we seek to anticipate and predict by means of political polling, economic forecasting, and scanning for any variety of “trends.” Allegedly discontinuous with the past, the future is to affirm, first

and foremost, some narrative of "progress" in which we fancy ourselves to be participants or, better yet, protagonists. It is not to be **the** future but, emphatically, **our** future – one that is to unfold on **our** terms, in conformity to metrics whereby **we** aim to prognosticate it and, thus, minimize its contingent nature.

Naturally, there is something incongruous about a framework simultaneously stipulating that the future be **different** from the here and now and also coveting its **predictability** from the vantage point of the present. If anything, in the digital age our paradoxical craving for "experiences" at once predictable yet novel, uniform yet drenched in sensation, has become positively frantic. Experience is only ever supposed to reach us on terms we have established beforehand. For what the modern individual prizes in an experience is not its revelatory meaning-potential but its sheer sensation or, rather, simulation of novelty. One is reminded of Tolstoy's Stepan Arkadyevich, who "liked his newspaper, as he liked a cigar after dinner, for the slight haze it produced in his head."² Indeed, the activity perhaps most emphatically associated with the future, education, now tends to be marketed as an "experience" – a commodity to which students are supposed to relate as spectators and consumers seeking satisfaction, rather than as human beings bound up in a narrative of transformative self-discovery. While an educational experience **may** involve learning, emphasis now is placed on "learning outcomes." If to be modern entails having "had the experience but missed the meaning" (as Eliot puts it), what has been eclipsed largely is a pre-modern, variously Platonic and/or Theist conception of life and thought as originating in a sense of "wonder" and multiple dimensions of time such as cannot be inventoried as the "mere" past or contained as a "predictable" future.

Still, it is to little avail simply to **assert** the superiority of a pre-modern, Theist conception of life and its underlying, "ecstatic" temporality (more about that soon). For one thing, that framework has been decisively unraveled over the course of several centuries; and any proposed return to an earlier, pre-modern framework in which the temporal order of our experiences is fully and intuitively present would be at best a quixotic endeavor. Nostalgia may make for good fiction, but it is not a viable, let alone sustainable principle for organizing an individual life or shaping an ethical political community. It also makes for poor theology. Far better, then, to proceed dialectically by showing why a strictly naturalistic model of human, time-bound existence cannot but fail **on its own terms**; and as befits any dialectical argument that means posing a series of questions: What does the dominant, naturalistic view of time entail? At what price do we embrace it? Is it possible to conceive of time differently? And what does

² L. Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. R. Pevear, L. Volokhonsky, Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 2002, p. 7.

this seemingly self-evident understanding of time tell us about ourselves as persons seeking meaning and fulfillment? As we shall find, a naturalistic framework construes time by dividing it into two dimensions, both notably abstract, even unreal: 1) Time as a strictly chronometric phenomenon, continually “lapsing” into oblivion (i.e., into a past that is nothing more than what has been subtracted from the remaining future). 2) Time as inexorably bent toward a future from which we anxiously recoil, either because it eludes our attempts at “accurate prediction” or because we shudder at what we foresee.

By way of taking a closer look at some of the core axioms that inform the naturalist-existentialist framework, to which the vast majority of individuals today subscribe, however unwittingly, I will initially draw on Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1927). While other important writers could also serve to illustrate the relevant points, Heidegger seems especially à propos. First, he is arguably the most influential spokesman for an existentialist-naturalist framework that gained widespread currency after WWII. Second, he had arrived at this position after gradually detaching himself from his Catholic upbringing in the Black Forest region, which was followed by his decade-long, transitional involvement with modern liberal Protestantism after 1914. Finally, the date of publication for *Being and Time* (1927) happens to fall in the same year when the other writer here at issue, T.S. Eliot, completed a nearly inverse trajectory. It had taken Eliot from his Unitarian roots in St. Louis and New England via philosophy studies at Harvard and Oxford, to the dystopic urban visions that inform his early poetry from “Prufrock” to *The Waste Land*. The journey ultimately concluded with Eliot’s renouncing the anxious existentialism of *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) and, in 1927, converting to Anglo-Catholicism, a shift most fully legible in *Four Quartets* (1936–1943).

Central to Heidegger’s analysis is our fundamental mode of “being-in-the-world,” our sheer “being-there” (*Dasein*) and “being thrust” (*Geworfenheit*) into a world filled with things, institutions, people, and the countless ways in which *Dasein* seeks to interpret itself. While all these other realities are “ready-to-hand” (*zuhanden*) and hold a manifest or potential use-value, they cannot proffer a transcendent, normative viewpoint by which we might achieve orientation in the world that comprises all these beings. Hence the myriad experiences and interpretations that make up Heidegger’s world never coalesce into a coherent, meaningful framework. Instead, he claims, the world is “worldly” (*weltlich*) through and through. It is so not merely because we habitually (if rather too casually) characterize modern life as “secular.” For to construe “worldly” and “secular” as equivalent is to retain some notion of transcendence, either affirmatively as the supernatural source of “worldly” existence or, skeptically, as the persistent, if fading, legacy of a pre-modern, Theist framework that has not yet been definitively expunged by the progressive forces of “secularization.”

Yet Heidegger's notion of "worldliness" (*Weltlichkeit*) is more thoroughgoing in that it asserts the strict immanence of all being, as well as its convertibility with the *Dasein* that confronts it. On this account, there is no transcendent source anterior to "worldly" *Dasein*, no Platonic triad of the beautiful, the good, and the true, no Christ to guide human existence in its flailing attempts at self-comprehension and justification. As it struggles to produce an account of itself, *Dasein* only sees that which is placed in its "care" (*Sorge*). And where "the being of *Dasein* is care" (*das Sein des Daseins ist die Sorge* [*Sein und Zeit*³ 232]), the horizon of "care" ("worry," "anxiety") has become all-encompassing. Viewed as radically finite, human existence on Heidegger's account not only has to develop a conception of life and world from its own resources; it also experiences this very task as an unrelenting burden. Such a dystopic view of modern existence also surfaces with some regularity in T.S. Eliot's poetry, both early and late, such as in "the strained time-ridden faces (...) filled with fancies and empty of meaning" (*BN*⁴ 100ff.) that we may encounter:

When an underground train, in the tube, stops too long between stations
And the conversation rises and slowly fades into silence
And you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen
Leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about.
(*EC* 118–121)

Eliot's Londoners are often portrayed thus, "caught in the form of limitation/ Between un-being and being" (*BN* 167f.). Indeed, up to a point they strikingly resemble Heidegger's *Dasein*, which appears circumscribed by "moods" (*Befindlichkeit* or *Stimmung*) that show it to be ineffably "attuned" to its own, terminally opaque existence. Of these moods, the ones that for Heidegger best capture *Dasein*'s attunement to finite, inner-worldly existence are "dread" (*Furcht*), "curiosity" (*Neugier*), and "anxiety" (*Angst*). As he puts it, "that about which *Angst* is anxious is being-in-the-world itself." A mood fundamental to human existence, "*Angst* as a mode of attunement first discloses the **world as world**" (*SZ* 187). Whatever knowledge *Dasein* may be able to attain regarding this world, into which it is thrust without ever being able to feel at home in it, whatever understanding and exegesis of the ambient beings, traditions, languages, systems, and values it may achieve – always unfolds against the backdrop of such dread and anxiety.

Considering the unsettled nature of the world in which we find ourselves, it would admittedly be unwise, not to say unpersuasive, for us now simply to oppose Heidegger's account with a metaphysical, perhaps overtly Theist

³ My further references to *Being and Time* will cite it as *SZ*.

⁴ Further Eliot's poems will be abbreviated: *BN* = "Burnt Norton," *EC* = "East Coker," *DS* = "The Dry Salvages," *LG* = "Little Gidding."

framework. For one thing, Heidegger's claims at times seem actually quite close to the radical Augustinian views of, say, Martin Luther, Jean Calvin, and Blaise Pascal. After all, it was Pascal who had already portrayed seventeenth-century man as "wandering about in times that do not belong to us," in a "condition of inconstancy, boredom, and anxiety [*inconstance, ennui, misère*], (...) equally incapable of knowing and of desiring not to know." Moreover, Heidegger's existentialist framework has proven enormously influential ever since its formulation in the late 1920s, such that for some time it has been widely assumed that any reasonably well-educated person today must embrace some version of it. Yet precisely this widespread and **unquestioning** acceptance of Heidegger's existentialist framework, like a self-fulfilling prophecy, has in the course of nearly a century brought about a world in which individuals now find themselves imprisoned to an ever-greater degree. For our material actions and engrained habits do not simply react to what is objectively given; they also cause our life-world gradually to mirror back the interpretations and descriptions with which we approach it.

To grasp the limitations of the existentialist framework, rather than rejecting it outright, we need to recover those terms that have ceased to hold any operative role in it. Conspicuously absent from Heidegger's account, then, are the Platonic notions of the good and the beautiful, as well as any model of an ethical community (*politeia*). Also missing are the theological virtues (hope, faith, and charity), as indeed the very notion of virtue as such – which Aquinas had made the very centerpiece of his theological anthropology. This is not to say that Heidegger, who early in his career had immersed himself in late Scholastic writing, altogether cut himself off from metaphysical conceptions. He does, for example, offer a quasi-prudential (and truly brilliant) account of human understanding and interpretation (SZ 148–160), albeit without recognizing or acknowledging its proximity to Aquinas' discussion of prudential judgment (*Summa theologiae* Ia IIae Q 57). Likewise, Heidegger's claim that the fundamental task of philosophy is to interrogate and "unveil" a knowledge already presupposed in our "basic concepts" (*Grundbegriffe*) retains important traits of Plato's dialectical method, which likewise does not argue **from** principles but, instead, seeks to reason back **toward** them. Yet such affinities notwithstanding, it is instructive to pinpoint those concepts that have either vanished from, or have been declared irrelevant to, Heidegger's account of *Dasein* as worldly, anxious, and finite to its very core. And as we do so, we begin to glimpse that the entire conflict between a metaphysical and an existentialist conception of life is fundamentally rooted in a sharp disagreement about the nature of time.

It is important to note that Heidegger not only rejects the Theist conception of eschatological time and the soul's potential salvation – not **in** but **from** time. He also repudiates any liberal-secular narrative of "progress" toward some hazy, inner-worldly perfection, the narrative that by the mid-nineteenth

century had effectively usurped the metaphysical-theist framework, as evidenced in Joseph Ratzinger's concise summary of the shifting relationship between the two frameworks:

The secularization of Christian eschatological thought has clearly sucked the sap out of faith awareness. People still have hopes for the historical process, but these impulses, now strangers to faith, have been transformed into secular faith in progress. (...) The 'well-being' which faith promises is thus diluted to the condition of the 'salvation of the soul' from which the 'happiness' sought by human beings in this life is now disconnected. (...) Now the soul's salvation is but a fragment, and happiness another, and soon these two parts will be seen as natural enemies.⁵

For his part, Heidegger resolves the antagonism by stipulating that there is no "goal" whatsoever to *Dasein*. There is only the "end" of death, understood as sheer "cessation" or "no-longer-being-there" (*zu-seinem-Ende-kommen* [SZ 242]) – the very specter of utter annihilation that had famously caused Job to quarrel with God in the Old Testament. Confined to the inner-worldly, distended time that separates birth from death, *Dasein* is nothing more than "not-yet-terminated" (SZ 242), marooned in the unreal space between a not-yet and a no-longer. As Heidegger puts it, "*Dasein* distends itself in such a way that its own being is constituted beforehand as this distension [*Erstreckung*]. The 'between' birth and death already lies *in the being* of *Dasein*. (...) [It] exists as born, and, born, it is already dying in the sense of being-toward-death [*Sein zum Tode*]" (SZ 374). Such a view does not dispute notions of an "after-death" such as immortality or anything "proposed for 'edification.'" Instead, Heidegger insists, there is simply no warrant for introducing such notions given the strictly inner-worldly analysis of *Dasein*. Yet far from being the ultimate termination or definitive rupture of *Dasein*, death is present to it at all times as the ultimate horizon toward which everyone of us inexorably advances: "*Dasein* dies (...) as long as it exists, but initially and for the most part [it does so] in the modality of *decay* [*des Verfallens*]." ⁶ The key word here, *Verfallen*, connotes a lapse, rather more in the temporal sense of a parking permit about to "expire" than in the Christian sense of "lapsing" spiritually. Ultimately, it is *Dasein*'s utter captivity within empty, linear, non-progressive time – forever lapsing but never properly advancing – that also vitiates any prospect of locating meaning in history. For as Heidegger insists time and again: nothing ever manifests itself **within** history that could credibly be said to **transcend** time.

⁵ J. Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1988, pp. 13–14 (German, *Auferstehung und ewiges Leben*, 48–49).

⁶ SZ 251–252. Stambaugh translates *Verfallen* as "falling prey." Yet *Verfallen* principally connotes a decaying originating from within rather than obtruded from without.

II

In the same year that saw the publication of *Being and Time*, on June 29th 1927 to be exact, T.S. Eliot was baptized and received into the Anglican Church in a very private ceremony (the doors at Holy Trinity Church in London were locked). As Eliot was to put it five years later, “The Christian scheme seemed the only possible scheme which found a place for values which I must maintain or perish.”⁷ To his close friends, Eliot’s step came as a surprise, even shock, and it highlighted yet again his intensely private and complex persona. Still, notwithstanding some shrill reactions by a few friends (Virginia Woolf among them⁸), Eliot’s conversion from the theologically content-free Unitarianism of his forbears to the intellectual and spiritual discipline of Anglo-Catholicism had long been in the making, and it concluded a prolonged phase of scrupulous self-examination by a poet who repeatedly stressed how much “I **hate** spectacular ‘conversions’” (*The Letters of T.S. Eliot* 3: 404). Nearly a year before taking that momentous step, Eliot seemed still uncertain. “In such a wilderness or desert” as mid-1920’s London, his “spiritual steps” toward Anglo-Catholicism struck him as “obscure and doubtful” (*The Letters of T.S. Eliot* 3: 255) at best. That wilderness, of course, had been almost eponymously captured in *The Waste Land*, the poem that brought Eliot lasting fame and, in the view of many, captured more powerfully than any other literary work the existential disorientation and damaged psyche of post-WWI Europe.

Published in late 1922, *The Waste Land* captures, in a language at once cryptic and vivid, the specter of modern existence: spiritually disjointed, bereft of communal stability, expressively stunted, morally irresolute, and temporally adrift within a shabby and mostly incomprehensible urban environment. All the characteristics of Heidegger’s *Dasein* are already in place. The discursive world of Eliot’s poem is one of disjointed “clatter and chatter” (anticipating the “chatter” [*Gerede*] of Heidegger’s nameless, anxiety-ridden individuals). In Eliot’s poem their verbal masquerade is meant

⁷ T.S. Eliot, “Christianity and Communism” [in:] *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot*, vol. 4 (1930–1933), ed. J. Harding, R. Schuchard, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2015, p. 424. Yet nother sixteen years later, in 1948, Eliot remarked that, particularly a person undergoing “conversion from indifference to Christian belief and practice – the convert of the intellectual or sensitive type is drawn towards the more Catholic type of worship and doctrine.” T.S. Eliot, *The Letters of T.S. Eliot*, vol. 3, ed. V. Eliot, J. Haffenden, New Haven: Yale UP, 2012, pp. 572–573f.

⁸ “I have had a most shameful and distressing interview with poor dear Tom Eliot, who may be called dead to us all from this day forward. He has become an Anglo-Catholic, believes in God and immortality, and goes to church. I was really shocked. A corpse would seem to me more credible than he is. I mean, there’s something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God.” V. Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 3 (1923–1928), New York: Mariner Books, 1980, pp. 457–458.

to procure them an identity they wish to have while forestalling recognition of who they truly are. We overhear only fragments of conversation, such as a Russian expatriate claiming German ethnicity at a Bavarian café (*Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch*); we briefly listen in on two working-class women at a London pub, one advising the other to contrive the undamaged, youthful female persona that her shell-shocked husband will expect to meet upon returning from the trenches: "Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart./ He'll want to know what you done with that money he gave you/ To get yourself some teeth. (...) He's been in the army four years, he wants a good time,/ And if you don't give it him, there's others will." There is the young clerk, smartly dressed and ruthless – "with one bold stare,/ One of the low on whom assurance sits/ As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire." Incapable of empathy and meaningful speech alike, he assaults the lonely typist who invited him to dinner, herself as anxious at the prospect of a life spent in empty solitude as she feels violated and bewildered by the clerk's feral sexual advances, "still unproved, if undesired."

And yet, for readers to grasp the sheer destitution of modern, dissociated sensibility, some fundamental expectancy is required, some faith in the possibility of life arriving at meaning and thus fulfilling a *telos* that has only been deferred but cannot be dismissed as sheer illusion. In short, what *The Waste Land* asks of us is not to affirm the world it depicts but, rather, to achieve self-recognition. For that to occur, we must resist the imitative fallacy of identifying with Eliot's depiction of the "spiritually indigent" nature of modern existence and, thus, allowing the dystopic structure of modern urban existence to condition our interpretive outlook on it. Instead, already in 1922, various images and allusions show, embedded among the nameless personae of *The Waste Land*, other figures, mainly associated with classical mythology and scripture, who do not map onto the flat-line model of time in which the poem's present-day characters appear trapped. Depicting how "under the brown fog of a winter dawn,/ A crowd flowed over London Bridge," the poem recalls Dante's amazement at the sheer numbers of those about to enter hell (*Inferno* III: 63). The speaker's exclamation – "I had not thought death had undone so many" – thus hints how the distended temporality of modern life nevertheless remains implicated in a metaphysical order. Eliot's fleeting allusion to Dante's *Commedia* thus associates the denuded, present-day condition of working-class Londoners with the countless dead souls of his famous precursor whose words, written six-hundred years earlier, now take on a prophetic quality. Similarly, there is the seer Tiresias, familiar from Sophocles and Lucian, silently witnessing the frightful sexual encounter of the typist and the clerk in Part III ("The Fire Sermon"). An "old man with wrinkled dugs [who]/ Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest," Tiresias has "foresuffered" the scene of sexual aggression unfolding in a shabby 1920s London apartment and unwittingly reenacting similar

depredations found in Greek mythology. Yet another instance involves Eliot's double allusion to Christ's unseen presence on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24: 13ff.) and Dante (*Purgatorio* XXI: 79):

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
 When I count, there are only you and I together
 But when I look ahead up the white road
 There is always another one walking beside you
 Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded (...)
 (*Waste Land* 359–363)

It is this motif of an unseen yet distinctly felt, supernatural presence that complicates the young Eliot's existentialist vision of "hordes swarming/ Over endless plains, stumbling in the cracked earth/ Ringed by the flat horizon only." By interlacing his images of modern, dissociated, and death-bound life with a wealth of allusions to Scripture and metaphysical poetry, Eliot compels us to see beyond the "brown fog" of modern finite existence. We do so as readers enjoined to reflect on their own reality, whose contours are laid bare in the medium of poetry, that is, by approaching word and image not as articles of consumption but as prompts for exegesis. Already in 1922, Eliot's verse discloses supra-personal meanings that challenge the prevailing, naturalist conception of life by making it the focus of poetic speech. The haunting symbolism of lines such as "Your shadow at morning striding behind you/ Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you" is precisely not an instance of Heidegger's "being-toward-death" (*Sein-zum-Tode*). For as an image that subtly amalgamates perceptual phenomena of light and shade with the specter of mortality, such lines compel us to transcend, as reflective readers, Heidegger's view of *Dasein* confined within merely lapsing time and seemingly bereft of all purpose and meaning.

By the mid-1930s, Eliot returned to poetry for what was to be his final, and arguably the greatest, literary achievement, his *Four Quartets*, written between 1936 and 1943. Above all else, these four poems constitute the most profound meditation on time found in the twentieth-century literature. And while they map a clear way beyond the radical finitude of Heidegger's "being-toward-death," they do not unilaterally **reject** that existentialist framework. Rather, in scrutinizing the multiple and distinctive ways in which time registers in consciousness Eliot achieves a far more nuanced and probing understanding than Heidegger's generic notion of time as sheer finitude (*Endlichkeit*). As they lay bare the sheer complexity of inner-time-consciousness, Eliot's *Four Quartets* show that temporality can itself become a focal point of our reflective awareness, thereby revealing itself to be inherently more than our sheer "distension" (*Erstreckung*) toward death. Written at a time of totalitarianism and global war assailing the idea of a just human

community and imperiling human life everywhere, these poems show the experience of time to be suspended between memories of a pre-modern world and "the metallated ways" (*BN* 125) of bureaucratic, economic, and militarized life. The pre-modern world unexpectedly fades into view as the contemporary traveler is obliquely transported back to the melodious sounds and gentle movements of Elizabethan village-life – humble, mirthful, earth-bound, and stabilized by steady rhythms enabling its inhabitants to experience and comprehend time itself:

Now the light falls
 Across the open field, leaving the deep lane
 Shuttered with branches, dark in the afternoon,
 Where you lean against a bank while a van passes,
 And the deep lane insists on the direction
 Into the village, in the electric heat
 Hypnotized.
 (...)
 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
 (...)
 Lifting heavy feet, lifted in country mirth
 Mirth of those long since under earth
 Nourishing the corn. Keeping time,
 Keeping the rhythm in their dancing
 As in their living in the living seasons
 The time of the seasons and the time of 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.
 (*EC* 14–46)

With its heavy, evenly distributed stress patterns, anaphoric syntax, and a pointed allusion to the opening of Ecclesiastes 3, Eliot's verse truly embodies the pre-modern, rhythmic conception of time of which it speaks. The contrast with modern time – abstract, linear, endlessly subdividing, and bereft of any transcendent dimension – is palpable. On this latter view, time is but invariant repetition, a far cry from the cyclical and rhythmic fullness of pre-modern life with all its milking, rising, falling, eating and drinking "in the living seasons." Instead, forever hypnotized

“in the electric heat,” modern, disaffected *Dasein* barely even realizes that, as Eliot puts it, “There is no end, but addition: the trailing consequence of further days and hours/ (...). Years of living among the breakage/ Of what was believed in as the most reliable” (*DS* 55–59).

Throughout his *Four Quartets*, Eliot recalls us to the several ways, each one deeply paradoxical, in which we experience time. Consider a gnomic line such as “To be conscious is not to be in time/ But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden, (...) the moment in the draughty church at smoke-fall/ Be remembered” (*BN* 83–88). At the moment of full consciousness, the flow of chronometric time is suspended. To be conscious of a phenomenon, however fleeting and miscellaneous, is to experience time as epiphanic and revelatory. Consciousness here finds itself so utterly absorbed by its object that it cannot even fathom itself as temporally or spatially distinct from it. Epiphanic moments of consciousness are not located *in*, or subject *to*, the flow of time; they involve “Neither arrest nor movement” (*BN* 63). Rather, their numinous quality envelops us when we least expect them, such as early in the first of the *Quartets*. As they traverse the yard of a manor house, destroyed two centuries before, Eliot and his companion

look down into the drained pool.
Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,
And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,
The surface glittered out of heart of light,
And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.
Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.
(*BN* 33–39)

At stake in such moments is not some notional or abstract truth but, above all, our capacity for responding to a fullness given for us to participate in it, even as we cannot claim it as a discrete proposition. To be conscious is to achieve presence, to find oneself “at the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;/ Neither from nor towards” (*BN* 62–63). However such presence is constituted, it will be sensed in its fullness before we can remember or name its discrete aspects. Inexplicably rising from amidst the fog of finite, endlessly lapsing time, we are “surrounded/ By a grace of sense” (*BN* 72–73); and the presence here is neither symbolic nor hypothetical, but real.

Even so, all consciousness must eventually rejoin the order of time so as to capture, in memory and in speech, what has just transpired. Eliot’s epiphanies are a far cry from Romanticism’s subjective flights of imagination and the symbolic claims they stake on sublime truths. Instead, modernist epiphanic writing comports with what, since the fifth century, came to be known

as apophatic (negative) theology, that is, an awareness of both God's presence and the impossibility, and impermissibility, of predicating specific things of God. Rather than drawing skeptical inferences from that constraint, Eliot's epiphanies unfold as a constant shuttling back and forth, in a dialectical movement of sorts, between a transcendent and a temporal order. It is the movement between what Eliot calls "a new world/ And the old made explicit, understood/ In the completion of its partial ecstasy" (BN 75–76), between an unconditional fullness and certitude and a belated, fragmentary knowledge of that very occurrence. For Charles Taylor, modernist epiphanies typically "come from between the words or images" and, as such, are "of something only indirectly available."⁹ Yet this state of being suspended "between" the mundane and the transcendent is itself something of which we can be conscious; and it is that awareness which shows our relationship to time to involve more than the hapless "being-toward-death" of which Heidegger speaks. The existentialist conception is thrown into relief for us precisely in those moments when epiphanic consciousness subsides and we find ourselves returned to finite time. For this return leaves consciousness decisively altered "by a grace of sense," rather than simply re-lapsing, unchanged, into mundane, secular existence. Thus, the person that has returned into ordinary time is now specifically conscious of that epiphany. Still, upon its return consciousness must seek shelter from a fullness and presence that no human can bear for long. As Eliot puts it,

the enchainment of past and future
Woven in the weakness of the changing body,
Protects mankind from heaven and damnation
Which flesh cannot endure.
(...)
"Only through time time is conquered"
(BN 79–82, 89)

To read that last line with comprehension, we must pause precisely at its mid-point where, in a startling repetition of the poem's key word, Eliot hints at the dialectical nature of our time-bound existence. Thus, it is our capacity for apprehending **within** the temporal order moments and meanings that point **beyond** it, which for Eliot constitutes the very heart of sacramental Christianity.

⁹ C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1989, pp. 465, 469, s.a. 477: "With this kind of epiphany, there doesn't need to be a determinate object at all. Words can do the framing or the concatenation of half-coherent images they deploy for us. Much of modern poetry works in this way. There may not be a succession of clearly defined images, but the very disruption and tension in what is evoked sets up an epiphanic field."

III

In closing, let us trace how in the final *Quartet* Eliot explores what it means to find ourselves time and again perched on the threshold separating ordinary time from the transcendent *eschaton* that is both our source and ultimate goal. "Little Gidding" is set in "midwinter Spring," the seasonal equivalent of hope and a precarious interlude when, "Between melting and freezing/ The soul's sap quivers. There is no earth smell/ Or smell of living thing." Set in such temporal ambiguity, the poem is preoccupied above all with the fulfillment of human time: "This is the spring time/ But not in time's covenant" (LG 11–13). To see where Eliot is going, let us consider some central tenets of Christian eschatology:

- As the doctrine concerning the ultimate or final things, eschatology refers, not to the endpoint in time but to the abolition of quotidian, human time or what Augustine calls "memory-time." Entwined with the idea of resurrection and the immortality of the soul, *eschaton* is the correlate of hope focused on a **beyond** time, rather than an apocalypse expected **at the end of time**. The latter is part of an intra-mundane construct known as "political theology," which "atrophy[ies] hope (...) [by] restating it in human, seemingly realist terms" and supplanting both faith and politics with "deceptive surrogates."¹⁰
- Beyond death understood as sheer annihilation, the Christian *eschaton* resolves the human being's fragmented and disordered existence in this world. Characteristic of the OT view of death as a descent into the underworld (*Sheol*) is both that the dead will never return and that, being dead, they abide in a state of permanent and total isolation. To be sure, such isolation often defines human existence in **this** world, which Eliot himself often depicts as a sphere "of dereliction, isolation, loneliness, and thus abandonment to nothingness. (...) [At] the heart of death is the absence of relationship."¹¹
- The *eschaton* can never be planned for or predicted as a specific event in history (cf. Luke 17: 20 – "The kingdom of God does not come with observation" [*non venit regnum Dei cum observatione*]). Instead, theology has consistently (and after the 13 century definitively) rejected any chiliaristic (stadial) conceptions of history such as would claim to forecast the end of the world; and in so repudiating "the idea of a definitive, intra-historical fulfillment" theology *eo ipso* "affirm[ed] the impossibility of an inner fulfillment of the world."¹²

¹⁰ J. Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, op. cit., p. 59 (Ger. 85).

¹¹ Ibidem, pp. 81–82 (Ger. 103–104).

¹² Ibidem, p. 213 (Ger. 215; bold mine). Finally, already in the writings of St. Paul, there is a split as to whether the *eschaton* is *impending* or whether its arrival can ever be gauged by human, time-bound means. The formation of the *ecclesia* and the gradual clarification of its central tenets by means of theological reflection, starting in the second century and continuing to this day, naturally implies that the conception of an unfathomably distant *eschaton* ultimately prevailed.

– Nevertheless, even as the *eschaton* falls altogether outside the order of time, it already dwells with and among us. Here it manifests itself in fragments, shards, and signs, such as in epiphanic moments of intensely focused, extra-temporal experience.¹³ Each such instance amounts to a figure of Christ, indisputably present though often unrecognized and never fully comprehended as regards the scope of His meaning – as hinted at by Eliot's allusion to Luke 24: 13 in *The Waste Land*.

Eliot's "Little Gidding" fundamentally comports with this understanding of eschatology. Flickering images, more sustained visions, and phantasmagoric voices of the past variously alert us to the fact that we are simultaneously **in** and **beyond** time. Though issuing **from** our spatio-temporal world, the epiphanic moment is never confined to it. Instead, it connects quotidian, time-bound life with the source, the *logos*, from which alone it derives coherence and meaning. In "Little Gidding," two closely related terms help us grasp how fragmentary intimations of the *eschaton* may be apprehended in this world: humility and community. Their centrality, however, must always be measured against the darkness and ravages of finite, historical time – thrown into sharp relief by the unprecedented air war over London in 1941–1942: "Ash on an old man's sleeve/ Is all the ash the burnt roses leave./ Dust in the air suspended/ Marks the place where a story ended" (LG 54–57). Yet no matter how conspicuous the violence and suffering of the present, history must also be read as a parable of its own futility. The forces of history cannot but expend themselves, leaving behind so much ash, dust, and death. Considered as the self-consummation of human time, history continually generates **images**, such as those just quoted, that allow us to become conscious of, and thereby transcend, finite, death-bound time. Not by coincidence, the historical persona at the center of "Little Gidding" is "a broken king" in a divided country, the recently defeated Charles I, who seeks refuge in the poem's eponymous monastic community, though facing execution soon thereafter. Finitude is real only for as long as it has not yet become an object of consciousness. Yet to apprehend finitude in the form of an **image** – "Dust in the air suspended" – already means to find oneself on the verge of transcending the naturalist framework from which the concept of finitude springs.

Throughout "Little Gidding" we are repeatedly being asked to achieve such a fundamental shift in perspective on our ambient, historical world. We are enjoined to discern, within the order of what is visibly given, the manifestation

¹³ As Hans Urs von Balthasar puts it, "faith, hope, and charity pass through a fragmentary existence toward an as yet unfathomable completion. Hence they can only grow distrustful if their completeness is made known and offered to them in advance. For it is the fragmentary nature of man and world that attests to what is authentic. Just as a blind person will feel with expert hands for the sharp edges of shards, so the virtues are informed by the breaking points of existence as to the direction toward completion intended for them by God." H.U. von Balthasar, *Das Ganze im Fragment*, Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1990, p. 116, trans. mine.

of something else, not visible *per se* but a compelling presence that decisively alters our self-understanding. As mundane being turns into **figura**, Eliot's poetry adjusts our focus from empirical certainties to inner certitude (to borrow John Henry Newman's distinction). Doing so also entails the suspension of our quest for conceptual dominion (Augustine's *libido dominandi*) over the historical world by learning to abide in concrete experience without seeking to assimilate it to our finite schemes and desires. Again, "Little Gidding" offers a fitting trope for such renunciation, since it is the name of a religious community where in 1649 defeated royal ambition sought refuge. In returning us to that place, Eliot's poem asks us to grasp history not merely as the temporal sequence of discrete events but as a parable exposing that very model's limitations. In Eliot's words:

You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.
And what the dead had no speech for, when living,
They can tell you, being dead: the communication
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.
(LG 40–48)

To apprehend and draw toward the *eschaton* is to merge with the voices of those who have come before us, to find oneself absorbed and transformed by "the communication/ Of the dead." Communication here is not the manufacture of propositions, syllogisms, or the conveyance of mundane information. Rather, it is to be taken in the strong sense of the Eucharist, the sacrament Eliot approached with the utmost seriousness; "I communicate three times a week," he writes in a letter.¹⁴ Communication means to recognize oneself as having been infused with the pentecostal spirit ("tongued with fire") that is embodied by the voices of the dead. Joining the dead in communion means to "acquire the wisdom of humility" (EC 97), to have found one's voice, one's meanings, one's final purposes in an act of undesigning, mutual recognition. In "Little Gidding," the two ghostly presences guiding Eliot toward communion and humility are those of Dante and Julian of Norwich. Let me conclude, then, with a few remarks about Dante's role in Part II of Eliot's final *Quartet*.

The apparition of "a familiar compound ghost" (LG 95) – a fusion of Dante, Yeats, and the founder of the seventeenth-century religious community at Little Gidding, Nicholas Ferrar – causes Eliot to exclaim, rather ambiguously: "What! Are **you** here?" Yet as the speaker readily acknowledges, that

¹⁴ To William Force Stead, 29 December 1927 (*The Letters of T.S. Eliot*, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 872).

exclamation itself issues not from his but from "another's voice." The words are Dante's, who recalls finding himself equally stunned upon encountering his friend Brunetto Latini in the *Inferno* (XV: 20). Reminiscent of similar moments in Dante's *Purgatorio*, Eliot's encounter with the voices of Dante and Julian conceives the *eschaton* as a point beyond death where we are received into a community of voices. Here we will no longer speak as mere individuals confined in their present but, instead, shall recognize ourselves to have been unwittingly shaped and guided, indeed given life by our communion with the voices of those who preceded us. Whatever may have set them at odds while alive, in death they all "Accept the constitution of silence/ And are folded in a single party" (LG 190–191). As Joseph Ratzinger pointed out, "the dialogue between God and man only ever unfolds as the dialogue between human beings."¹⁵

Likewise, for Eliot eschatological awareness begins when we recognize ourselves to have been participants in a communion of voices all along as we glimpse, however fleetingly, the meaning of redemption: "See, **now** they vanish/ The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them,/ To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern" (LG 163–165; bold mine). Eliot's "now" ("now they vanish") echoes a point made before: namely, that the *eschaton* does not terminate some hypothetical "time future" but, instead, is "now" recognized to have always been present, however unseen, within our "time-ridden" existence. It is not the antithesis or conclusion of finite existence. Instead, being itself "not in time's covenant" (LG 12), the *eschaton* is the "end" of which Eliot speaks in the closing lines of "Little Gidding," "the stillness/ Between two waves of the sea (...) here, **now**, always – / A condition of complete simplicity" (LG 250–253). The passage runs parallel to the concluding lines of his first *Quartet*, "Burnt Norton," where Eliot remarks how all "words, after speech, reach/ Into the silence,"

Not the stillness of the violin, while the note lasts,
Not that only, but the co-existence,
Or say that the end precedes the beginning,
And the end and the beginning were always there
Before the beginning and after the end.
And all is always now.
(BN 144–149)

To understand Christian eschatology is to understand this "now" as something more than a merely logical link between past and future. For by revealing the point "where we **start** from" (LG 216; bold mine), the *eschaton*

¹⁵ "Der Dialog Gottes mit den Menschen spielt sich nur durch den Dialog der Menschen miteinander ab." J. Ratzinger, *Einführung in das Christentum* [in:] *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4, Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 2014, p. 101; trans. mine.

is, for Eliot, the incarnate God extending the gift of meaning (“Love [...] the unfamiliar name”) to each individual life as it unfolds within the horizon of finite, distended time. Eliot’s careful placement of the adverb “now” throughout his *Four Quartets* recalls an analogous, similarly perplexing, use of the word in the Gospel of John: “The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live” (*venit hora et nunc* [vūv] *est quando mortui audient vocem Filii Dei et qui audierint vivent* [John 5: 25]).¹⁶ In his commentary on John, Aquinas flags “two strange occurrences [*duo mirabilia*]. One when [John] says that the dead will hear. The other, when he adds that it is through hearing that they will come to life again, as though hearing comes before life.”¹⁷ Yet if we understand the resurrection figuratively, as an “interior concept” (Aquinas), the passage begins to speak to us. For one thing, it suggests that for the numberless dead encountered by the speaker of *The Waste Land*, “death” is not a matter of waiting for biological or chronometric time to run out. Rather, death names their failure to recognize and embrace the epiphanic “now” – the moment of utmost hazard, of decision. To St. Paul’s question, “Why stand we in jeopardy every hour?” (1 Cor 5: 30), Eliot responds not with speculations about a “beyond” history but with a somber and haunting image of its elusive fullness:

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.
(LG 233–237)

With this humble, meditative image of timelessness as something momentarily and unexpectedly impressed on us as “the light fails/ On a winter’s afternoon,” Eliot pushes back against the misleading identification of eschatology with apocalypse, with extreme calamity and disaster found in natural or human history. Set over against such spectacles unfolding in quotidian time, Eliot’s Christian conception of the *eschaton* is minimalist as regards its empirical manifestation, though maximalist as regards its spiritual yield. With time and history momentarily reconciled and made intelligible as “a pattern/ Of timeless moments” in the utter stillness of the “now,” Eliot illumines

¹⁶ Relevant passages from Scripture: John 5: 25, 11: 26, 16: 17–18, the story of Lazarus (John 11), Matthew 28: 20, Luke 17: 20ff., Acts 3: 20ff.

¹⁷ St T. Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Aquinas Institute: Lander, WY, 2013, vol. 1, p. 295. As von Balthasar has argued in great detail, John’s eschatology consistently emphasizes an understanding of the *eschaton* as fully present, through Christ, in the present and, as such, furnishing us with concrete visions of history’s incipient fulfillment.

a well-known line from the epitaph of Ignatius of Loyola: *non coerceri maximo contineri minimo, divinum est* ("Not to be confined by the greatest, yet to be contained within the smallest, is divine").¹⁸

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¹⁸ The line surfaces in the ninety-five-line epitaph for St. Ignatius, written by an anonymous Jesuit of the Franco-Belgian province around 1640. It was subsequently chosen by the German Romantic poet, Friedrich Hölderlin, as the epigraph for his epistolary novel, *Hyperion* (1799). For a detailed textual history of the epigraph, see the annotations to Hölderlin's novel by Friedrich Beissner. F. Hölderlin, *Hyperion* [in:] *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. F. Beissner, Stuttgart: Cotta, 1957, vol. 3, p. 437. The epigraph is also the focus of a detailed exegesis by Joseph Ratzinger; see his *Einführung in das Christentum*, op. cit., pp. 143ff.